the third alternative

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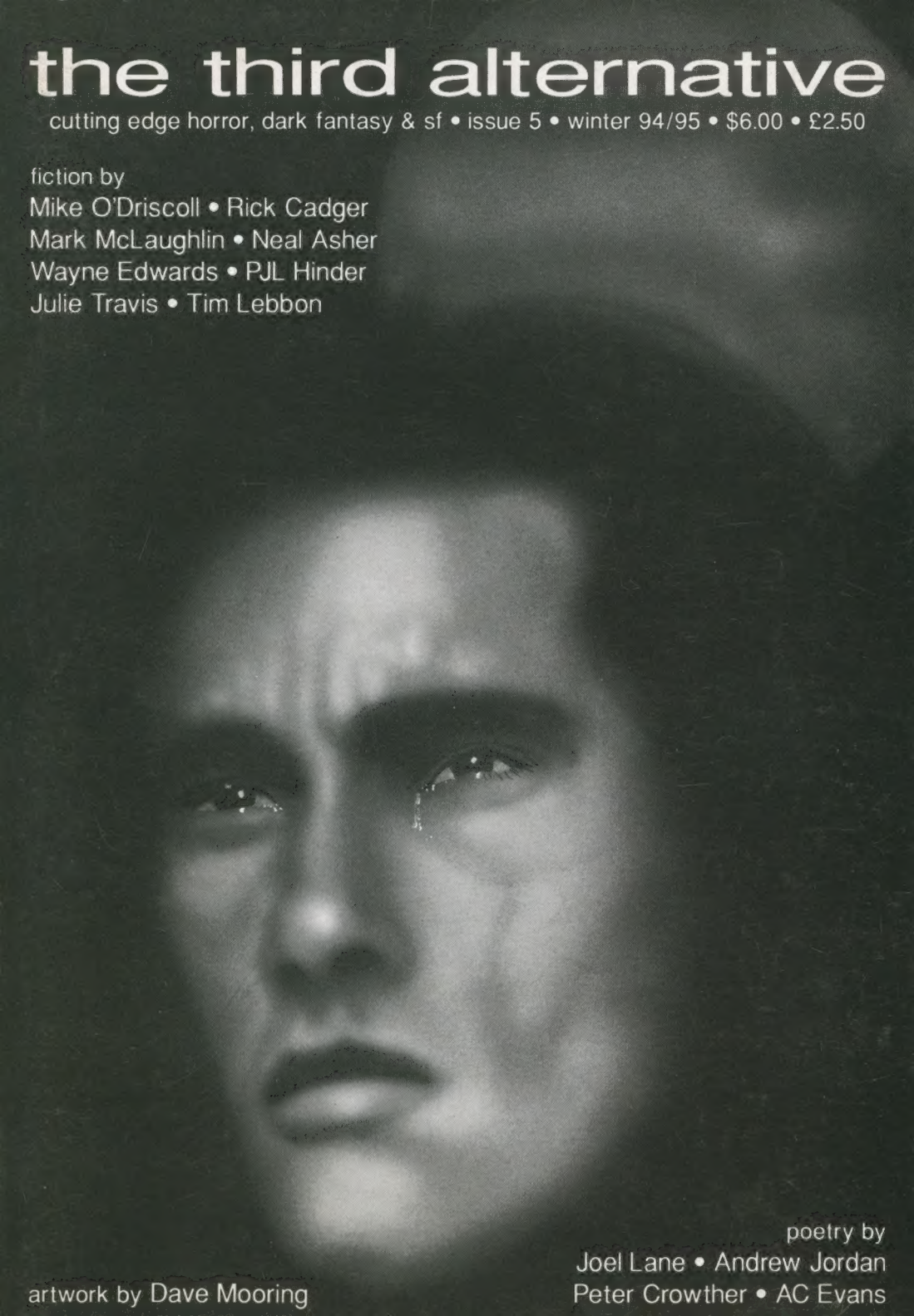

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COVER: CRY WOLF *by Dave Mooring*

Handshake is the newsletter issued by John Francis Haines on behalf of the Eight Hands Gang, an informal group of SF poets, each one containing much valuable news & information. Available for SAE from 5 Cross Farm, Station Road, Padgate, Warrington WA2 0QG ▪ Chris Kenworthy has announced that he is closing down **Barrington Books**. Planned novels & anthologies will no longer be published ▪ Issue 3 of **Zene** is out in February, featuring guidelines from the UK, USA & Canada; articles by Braemar, Ashley & Couzens; plus loads of news, views & reviews. Can you live without it? £1.95 or £7 for four issues, payable to 'Zene', 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB ▪ Issue 11 of Ann Kennedy's excellent magazine of the surreal **The Silver Web** was published recently. Even in illustrious company Martin Simpson's first short story 'Last Rites & Resurrections' is truly outstanding. $5.75 or $10 for two issues (check for overseas rates), payable to 'The Silver Web', PO Box 38190, Tallahassee, FL 32315, USA ▪ The anthology **Cold Cuts II: More Tales of Terror** was also published recently. Superb fiction from an impressive line-up of writing talent, many of them TTA contributors & subscribers: Jean-Daniel Breque, Mark Chadbourn, Mat Coward, Andy Cox, Derek Fox, Eifion Jenkins, Garry Kilworth, Joel Lane, Ben Leech, Paul Lewis, Bob Lock, Steve Lockley, Mark Morris, Mike O'Driscoll, Katherine Roberts, Nicholas Royle, Brian Stableford, Peter Tennant, Conrad Williams, with a generous introduction by Peter Crowther. Edited by Paul Lewis & Steve Lockley, published by Alun Books (Second Floor, Royal Buildings, Talbot Road, Port Talbot, West Glamorgan), priced £6.99 ▪ Congratulations to **The Third Alternative** on winning the Dragon's Breath Award for 'Best New British Fiction Magazine 1994' ▪ **Dragon's Breath** is the monthly small press review, available free for SAE/IRC from Zine Kat, 13 Hazely Combe, Arreton, Isle of Wight PO30 3AJ ▪ Paul Beardsley's magazine of mature SF/Fantasy, **Substance**, should be out by the time you read this. £9 for a four-issue subscription, payable to 'Neville Barnes', 65 Conbar Avenue, Rustington, West Sussex BN16 3LZ ▪ *When news space is limited preference will be given to subscribers. Please don't forget to mention* ***The Third Alternative*** *when replying to news & adverts* ▪

Editorial

I'm writing this mid-December, a time when minds are naturally on other things. Despite this, scores of letters have already arrived, some just to show appreciation of TTA4, others to add to the various debates raging in what is surely one of the liveliest letters columns around. So not too much should be read into the fact that this time around there are just two pages of letters instead of the usual four. It's simply that an extra two pages were needed to make TTA5 into what I think is an extremely strong issue.

In fact I think I've been lucky right from the start in that some of the finest writers around have been willing to contribute work of a very high standard to TTA. That's not just my opinion either, but I'll bring you up to date on that another time... For now, while considering the strength of the stories in TTA, and because a few people have expressed an interest in a 'best of' anthology (especially those who missed the early issues), I'd like to share a few spontaneous thoughts on magazine and anthology publishing, and the hypothetical TTA anthology itself.

I don't think there can be any doubt that books are easier to market (and therefore sell) than magazines, but at the same time I think there are things you can do in a magazine that you can't do in a series of anthologies, at least not successfully, and definitely not as often. One is that you can be more eclectic in your choice of material. Care should be taken of course to ensure that an issue of a magazine becomes more than the sum of its parts, but you can still print two stories of equal merit alongside each other that, even though they might both coincide with your editorial policy, wouldn't necessarily be at home in the same anthology. I think this is because more diversity is *expected* of magazines. This also means that you can take certain risks.

With a magazine you come in on the ground floor, as it were, especially if you have a schedule that enables you to publish more stories: you could easily put out four quality magazines a year, but never four quality anthologies. By the same token, four issues of a small press magazine is probably too small a number from which to draw a successful anthology. To stick with the building analogy, I'd see the anthology as the penthouse suite. But just like with a magazine, it needs to be more than the sum of its parts, which means that some stories, though equally good in themselves, could probably not be included. While such an anthology could, in theory, be the perfect representation of TTA (or any magazine for that matter), it would not in that regard *truly* be the 'best of' TTA. However, leaving aside the obvious fact that it would be worryingly expensive, what it could achieve would be very rewarding. At the very least it would result in a little more exposure for the writers and, inevitably, for the magazine itself, and that would benefit us all.

It's an intriguing prospect, and something worthy of serious consideration. Therefore I would appreciate more comments from subscribers on the subject, whether detailed suggestion or just vague notion.

Meanwhile, greetings once again from the cutting edge. I hope you enjoy TTA5.

A BREATH OF NOT BELONGING

RICK CADGER

It was a solemn journey that Thomas embarked upon several times a week. Down the dismal stairs, with their vague, lingering essence of urine; and then out of the building's back door, into the alley that connected the street in front with the Woolworth's car park behind. With each step he took, the bottles in his polythene bag cried out with thin, empty voices. It was almost a ritual, an act of meditation, that long walk to the bottle bank that stood at the car park's edge. Thomas could not remember how many years had come and gone since he had first beaten the path he now trod, nor how many times he had retraced those same steps.

He would shrug when he thought of it. There were so many things he had forgotten. It seemed that with every bottle he dropped into the bank, he also deposited more of his powers of recollection.

Today's load was light; only three bottles clinked in Thomas' bag, and his step was steadier than usual. There was a rare precision to his movements, a purposefulness thoroughly at odds with his customary shambling demeanour. Thomas had found employment, and he was making a supreme effort to pull himself together in the hope that *this* time he would be able to keep the job longer than a month. It was with that end in mind that he had shaved, and put on clean clothes. Neither thing was remarkable in itself, but for him to do both on the same morning was a reflection of the concentration and effort Thomas was investing in this last, desperate attempt to salvage something of his humanity. He stuffed the empty bag into his jacket pocket, as he fled the heart-rending crash of shattering glass —the sounds of dying friends.

Work started at eight-thirty, when the first batch of plates piled up beside him, begging deliverance from the film of breakfast grease that adhered to their cracked glaze. Thomas washed dishes all day long, his only respite being a thirty-minute lunch break, and any enjoyment he might have gleaned from that bland fry-up was marred by the knowledge that, even as he ate, he was adding to his monotonous workload.

His employer, a fussy, effeminate man, flitted in and out of the kitchen, peering repeatedly over Thomas' shoulder to see that the new hand was pulling his weight. The fidgety little manager's scrutiny was bothersome to Thomas. It was hard enough to control his shaking hands, without the additional stress imposed by the other man's constant, hovering presence. He hadn't dropped or broken anything so far, but it could only be a matter of time before he made a mistake. The only uncertainty in Thomas' mind was whether his eventual downfall would be due to inebriation as his willpower failed, or if quaking withdrawal would get him first.

It was dark when his shift finished at six in the evening. The streets were busy with the gushing throng of eyes-front pedestrians that always crammed

the pavements at that time. For most of the way home, Thomas walked in the gutter or on the road in his desperation to avoid accidental contact, and the confrontation that might result. There were advantages to the milling chaos, despite the shell-shock instilled in Thomas by the enforced proximity to such numbers. Anonymity and camouflage were more easily achieved in a crowd than on a quiet street.

As he cut across the car park and entered the shelter of the alley, Thomas felt his breath begin to come more easily, as if a constricting band had been removed from around his chest. He paused for a moment in the quiet shadows of territory that felt secure to him, and watched the hateful bustle from which he had just escaped. The stream of late shoppers returning to their vehicles, and the steady exodus of those vehicles from the parking lot, reminded Thomas of the feverish comings and goings of bees from a hive. He could not remember a time when he had ever felt that he was a part of that hive. Nor, as he stood watching, did he feel any desire to belong.

He had had enough experience of people in his time to know that prolonged exposure to them inevitably resulted in pain, betrayal, mistreatment, exploitation. Faces from the past superimposed themselves briefly upon the scene before him, until a shudder tore him free of his reverie.

As he passed through the entrance hall, Thomas glanced at the rows of pigeon-holes that held the tenants' mail. His pigeon-hole was empty, as always. He started up the four flights to his apartment. The stairs still smelt of urine, but an underlying hint of disinfectant told of a futile attempt on the part of some embarrassed tenant to expunge the odour.

There were three flats on each floor of the building except the ground floor which housed only one, and there were four storeys. Thomas had never seen most of his neighbours. The only other tenants he knew by sight were Hayleigh, the landlord's rent collector and nominal caretaker-handyman who occupied the ground floor apartment; and the woman who had the apartment next to Thomas' own. Thomas had never seen Hayleigh do anything to maintain the building; indeed, the place was beginning to exhibit clear signs of decay. The young woman—scarcely more than a girl really—was a prostitute. Her name was Hannah.

Thomas closed the door behind him and leaned against the warped wood. He closed his eyes and, exhaling, let a day's worth of tension flow out of him. After a few moments he pushed himself forwards, heading for the sideboard, and a drink.

His one-roomed flat was poorly furnished; there was not a single item that hadn't had at least one previous owner. Thomas poured himself a Scotch and switched on the battered black and white television which stood on a table in the corner of the room. He waited for the set to warm up and for a picture to appear, but within moments he had lost interest in it. His attention wandered instead to the photograph that stood on the sideboard by the wall. The colours had faded through exposure to sunlight; the muted hues, mostly reds, pinks and browns, now appeared almost sepia. The face in the picture smiled at him.

As he sipped from his glass, it seemed strange to Thomas how conflicting emotions could co-exist. The photograph of Bernadette was unutterably precious to him; he was sure that without it he would be unable to retrieve his sister's face from the wreckage of his memory, and the admission caused him pain. Yet there were times when he felt that he would give anything to be able to forget those few fragments of the past which

still resisted exorcism by firewater – Bernadette among them.

There came a hard knock upon his door. When Thomas opened it Hayleigh was standing there. The caretaker was a large man in his forties: he had a permanently sweaty-looking complexion, and his lank, black hair was oiled straight back on his head. The swell of his paunch meant that the bottom two buttons on his grubby denim shirt were always unfastened, as was the top button on his grey trousers. The off-white diamond of underwear thus exposed attracted Thomas' attention, and he spoke to it instead of Hayleigh's face.

"Yes?"

"Rent," Hayleigh growled.

"I don't have it. Today's Thursday and I don't get paid until Friday."

"Rent's due Thursdays."

"I'm sorry," Thomas said miserably. "There's nothing I can do. They stopped my dole and housing benefit cheque when I found work; but I will give you the money tomorrow, I promise."

"Landlord won't like that. *Thursday* is rent day."

"I'm sorry," Thomas said again, but Hayleigh had already moved on down the landing. He closed the door and went back to his drink. From outside he heard the sound of Hayleigh banging on Hannah's door. The door opened and closed, and a few minutes later Thomas heard through the thin wall the coarse, rhythmic sound of Hayleigh collecting the rent.

He awoke confused. Thomas could see the glow of the street light outside his room through the flimsy beige curtain; and at the edges, where the curtain was too small to cover the whole window, black sky said that it was the middle of the night.

He couldn't make out the time on the luminous face of the *Baby Ben* alarm clock on the sideboard, but he knew it hadn't been the clock that had woken him—it was a good clock, and he knew that it wouldn't ring until half-past seven. Thomas needed certainties like that in his life.

His eyes had closed again when he heard the noise from beyond the wall at the head of his bed. It took several seconds to recognise the sound as being a voice—people didn't usually make noises like that. Thomas shifted, trying to find a position which would blot out the sound, but he could not. Eventually he knelt up on the bed and pressed an ear to the wall. From Hannah's room he heard someone sobbing... no, moaning. It was both and neither. Another voice came to him, but the second was speaking in normal, if hushed tones. Thomas couldn't make out the words. He heard scuffling and a couple of sharp sounds like slaps. There was a cry and the sobbing redoubled.

If he had been less disorientated by his sudden waking Thomas might have slipped back beneath the bedclothes. He knew that it was stupid to interfere in things that didn't concern him; nevertheless, he pulled on his trousers and opened the door to the landing. He reached the door of Hannah's flat and stopped to listen; then without warning the door opened and a man emerged. Thomas gasped and stepped backwards, startled. His heart beat violently and for a second he thought he was going to be sick. The man paused outside the door, apparently as shocked as Thomas by the encounter, then his lip curled and he glared into Thomas' face as he pushed past and started to hurry downstairs.

The man had left the door open, and Thomas could hear crying from inside. He called 'Hello?', but there was no answer except the continued crying. He entered slowly, uncomfortably, acutely aware of the hour, and the fact that he hadn't been invited to poke his nose in. He stopped just inside the door.

Hannah sat on the edge of the bed with her face buried in her hands. Thomas pushed the door shut and moved as quietly as he could until he stood in front of her. Hannah's long, dark hair had fallen over her face and hands so he couldn't see if she was hurt. She was dressed—which was a profound relief to Thomas—wearing a short, black lycra skirt, dark stockings or tights, and a black leather jacket. He decided that she was aware of his presence as the sobbing had ceased, although her shoulders still shook when she breathed. He sat down beside her.

"It's Hannah, isn't it?" he said gently. She didn't speak. "Are you all right?" he asked. "Did that fellow hurt you?"

Hannah still didn't respond, and for a moment Thomas wondered if he should leave. Was her silence an indication that his concern was unwelcome?

"Can I get the police for you? A doctor? Are you hurt?" he asked again. Thomas wasn't sure what to do: he didn't really know this young woman — he wasn't even sure that she knew he was her neighbour.

"I'll tell you what," he said, getting to his feet, "I'll leave you in peace for now, but if you need anything just knock on my door or bang on the wall by the wardrobe there. I'm just in the room next door, okay?" But when he reached the door and gripped the knob she spoke.

"Stay." She hadn't moved. He still couldn't see her face.

"Well, of course I will, if it makes you fell better." He took his place next to her again. "D'you think that fellow might come back for another go at you?" he said. "Did he hurt you very much?"

Hannah still didn't answer. Thomas reached out to brush the hair back from her face, and she lowered her hands.

"That's better. Now, let's have a look at you." He lifted her chin gently with a finger and thumb and turned her face towards him. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying, but there was no smeared mascara. Thomas was surprised to see she wore no make-up except a heavy layer of foundation and powder. The effect was slightly odd; it gave her face an almost monochrome uniformity of shade and texture. Despite the presence of features, Hannah's face seemed somehow blank. Right now, however, her cheeks were blotchy; a red and white imprint suggested that the fingers of a slapping hand had left their mark. Her bottom lip seemed swollen near one corner of her mouth.

"Oh, your poor face," Thomas said softly. "Let's get you comfy and I'll find something to put on those knocks." She allowed him to lift her legs onto the bed and turn her so she was leaning against the headboard. Thomas saw with a shock that the black blouse she wore beneath the jacket gaped open and her breasts were exposed. "I'm sorry," he stammered and pulled her jacket around her, but Hannah didn't seem to be aware of her state of semi-undress, or of much else.

Thomas found a face flannel and a jug which he filled with cold water, and he did what he could to soothe the bruises on Hannah's face. He helped her to lie down and covered her with the duvet, then he sat beside her on the bed and watched until he was sure she slept.

It was light when he awoke. He was lying on Hannah's bed and she was sitting up beside him gazing at the window. Thomas realised with a shock that his trousers were undone, and that Hannah's fingers were working away at his erect penis. She was humming gently to herself.

"What do you think you're doing?" he gasped, scrambling from the bed and fumbling to adjust his clothes. "I didn't come here for that." Hannah didn't reply, she just gazed at the window.

Thomas closed the door as quietly as he could on the way out. He felt dirty, guilty. With burning cheeks he sneaked the few feet to his own door praying that no one had seen him leaving Hannah's room. Once inside, he sank onto his own dishevelled bed. He glanced at the *Baby Ben.* It was ten minutes to nine and he was late for work. Thomas covered his face with his hands and cried.

It was an awful day. From the moment Thomas arrived at the café he knew he was to be persecuted. The hovering, insect-like manager buzzed angrily upon his late appearance, and made sure the rest of the kitchen staff heard him tell Thomas that he'd known him for an unreliable slacker the very first time he'd seen him.

Thomas' hot face felt as if it would melt.

What was more, the manager added, he'd smelt the odour of drink that first day and he'd said to the owner, who had given Thomas the job, that he'd lay odds that Thomas wouldn't last a month. He wished the owner had taken the wager, he said; he could use the money.

By some miracle Thomas managed to keep a grip all morning, until the lunchtime mountain began to grow at his elbow. The first dropped plate didn't break, and the manager merely glared. A few minutes later the second hit the floor and smashed loudly. Thomas stood still and closed his eyes, his hands tensed into fists beneath the grey studs that filled the sink. He heard the hateful little man's feet crunching the fragments of cheap china into powder, then felt breath on his neck as the manager spoke quiet spite into his ear.

"You're finished, you sodden old wino bastard."

Thomas whirled, lashing at the man's head. As he struck, he saw with surprise the dripping ladle gripped in his fist. The meeting of utensil and skull produced a sharp *clack!* that echoed off the white-tiled walls forever. The manager dropped to his knees clutching his head, and Thomas grabbed his coat and fled.

When he arrived home it was very late, and he was very drunk. The stench of urine on the stairs made him feel ill, and he paused to mask it with the smell of his own vomit. Once inside his apartment, Thomas rinsed his mouth and wiped a cold flannel over his face. His mind buzzed and his ears rang. He slumped into his armchair, too drunk to turn on the television, but it didn't matter, for he filled the dark screen with pictures of his own.

His dreams were of Hannah; but not Hannah as she had been when he had seen her. This was Hannah as she should be, with bright eyes and a voice full of music and life. She walked with a man through wide, cobbled streets peopled with men and women wearing clothes of strange, foreign styles. The man carried an infant slung on his back papoose fashion. They laughed as they walked, and the child smiled into the sunshine.

During his brief period of employment Thomas had started to become accustomed to mixing with people again. The kitchen staff had always had civil words to offer him, even though his shyness had kept him from real conversation. He had also felt a stirring in his soul which he had dimly recognised as the cautious re-emergence of a sense of worth. Self-respect.

Despite the loss of his job, and his subsequent lapse into drunkenness, Thomas persevered and managed to avoid falling completely into his old ways. The appeal of alcohol's oblivion was strong, but for the time being Thomas was stronger. He kept himself busy by maintaining his acceptable appearance, and actively seeking another job. People

treated him politely, calling him *Mister* Sheehan. As his confidence grew, his manner reflected it, and his trembling hand gradually became as steady as it had been long ago, in the days before his world had collapsed in confusion, pain and mist from a bottle.

But the loneliness was as bad as ever. Worse, in fact, because his new found clarity of mind exposed him to the full, cruel keenness of its cutting edge. His dealings with people, no matter how cordial, were fleeting and superficial. Apologetic rejections of his services.

And he often dreamed of Hannah.

One afternoon, returning from his quest for employment, Thomas thought he heard someone call his name as he reached out the hand holding his door key. He paused and listened but there was no repeat of the sound, and he dismissed it as something imagined.

He entered his flat and closed the door on the world. He changed from his suit into jeans and a sweater, then got some beans on toast which he ate in front of the television. The news washed over him, leaving him none the wiser about the world he inhabited. The regional magazine programme that followed it seemed similarly irrelevant: a buzz of words about people who were nothing like him. It soon became enough of an irritation that Thomas got out of his seat to switch the set off.

He slumped back into the armchair. Today, like every other, he had covered a good distance, and he was tired. Winter's presence lingered still, although it was supposed to be spring; and as he gazed out at the dark, early evening sky, Thomas fell asleep.

Again came visions of Hannah. But now she had changed: her features were tortured by great tragedy. There was no laughter in this Hannah, only profound and absolute sorrow. Of the man and the child there was no sign, and Thomas felt that their absence and Hannah's sadness were linked. With this realisation he found himself able to identify the flavour of her misery. The essence was of loss.

His vision showed him Hannah in a remote place, far from the town he had first dreamt of. This place was deep in mountainous, rough country, and Hannah was in the company of an old woman. The woman's carved face revealed many things: great age, wisdom, composure and most of all, immense compassion. She held Hannah's hands and spoke to her as she gazed into her eyes. Thomas couldn't hear the old woman's words because of a strange melody that suddenly seemed to fill the world with the sound of wind in a minor key. Dust filled the air as the wind grew stronger, and the old woman huddled in the lee of a boulder with the cowl of her robe pulled up to protect her face. A terrible scream rose even above the noise of the tempest. A sound of purest agony. Hannah stood unbowed in the centre of the windstorm, and as Thomas watched, the flesh was stripped from her bones by the wind's teeth. Then the dust grew thicker, and he could see no more. When the mistral finally subsided the old woman was alone.

As his eyes opened, Thomas knew that he had heard his name spoken, and that it had been the call that had woken him. His eyes widened as he saw Bernadette's face on the television screen, and as he gaped she called him again. Thomas teetered on the brink of fainting; his heart thumped and he felt sick. When he finally realised the truth, it was almost as much of a shock as the illusion had been. The face on the screen was the reflection of the photo on the sideboard; light from the street poured in through the window straight onto the face of his dead sister.

But he heard a voice, and as he recovered from the waking nightmare, he heard it again. He followed the sound out onto the landing, and as the cold air outside his room touched his damp cheeks he realised that he had been crying.

Thomas stopped outside Hannah's room, and the door opened. She said nothing, but walked back into her room leaving him to follow. He closed the door behind him.

"You were kind." Her head was bowed, and her back towards him. Her voice was so quiet as to be almost inaudible.

Thomas moved closer so he would hear her better. She sat on the bed, and he took a place beside her. He felt uncomfortable. It had been a couple of months since the embarrassment of that other encounter, and this was the first time he'd seen Hannah since then – except in those strange dreams.

"You are alone," she said, and Thomas knew that she was describing his life. There was a strange quality to her speech. She spoke as if it were an ability she was still perfecting. Each word was pronounced carefully, but without emphasis or accent; the overall effect was stilted, like the halting speech of a foreigner.

The room was lit only by a table-lamp containing a bulb of modest wattage, and there as much shadow as light. This, combined with Hannah's odd manner, lent the atmosphere a certain surreal quality. Thomas sat and waited for her to say more, but she was silent. Eventually, she raised her head and turned her face towards him. Had he not been so close to her, Thomas would not have noticed the tracery of tiny lines that covered her skin. Fine and red in colour, the lines divided the surface of her exposed flesh like the demarcations of jigsaw fragments. She was not wearing the foundation that had blanked her face the last time he had seen her, and now he looked he saw the same network covering her arms, hands...

She reached out a hand and touched the dampness on his rough cheek. Thomas dragged a sleeve across his face to dry the embarrassing moisture. To his dismay fresh tears welled to replace those he had wiped away. He felt the hot trails burning down his cheeks. "Well now," he said, eyes wide with surprise. "I'm sure I don't know what's wrong with me."

Hannah lay on the bed and gently pulled Thomas down to lie beside her, positioning him so his head rested upon her breasts. After a time his weeping subsided. There was no fumbling, no embarrassed, clumsy pulling at buttons or zips; the clothes melted from their bodies. As they lay together, Thomas found himself telling Hannah everything.

He told her how he and his sister had seen their parents shot in their own home by men who had called them scum. He told her how they had been mistreated by an alcoholic aunt who regarded them as burdensome brats. How, as tragedy mutilated their emotions, and puberty confused their bodies, he and Bernadette had found some comfort in each other's arms and each other's beds. He told her of his brief period of imprisonment when their relationship had been discovered some years later, and of Bernadette's death at her own hand, persecuted by the self-righteous Catholicism of people who preached forgiveness. He told her of his own flight across the sea from a community that abhorred his 'crime' more than that of his parents' assassins. And of his descent into oblivion.

He lay with his face against Hannah's breast, her arms cradling his head as if it were an infant she was nursing. She stroked his hair, and began to sing. At first no words, just a strange melody that followed no simple pattern or for-

mula, yet settled easily on the ear. For some reason it reminded him of the traditional Irish songs his mother had loved to sing, but there was an even more ethereal and alien feel to Hannah's music; an undertone that put him in mind of exotic places, Asia perhaps.

He realised that there were words now, embroidered into the gossamer melody. The language was strange, beyond his understanding, but the meaning he knew. The story had been told to him already, in his dreams.

Thomas propped himself up on an elbow. Hannah looked into his face, her eyes alive and intent. She pulled him onto her, and he felt himself grow hard again. She guided him inside her with gentle fingers.

"Will you come?" she asked as he began to move slowly in and out of her.

"I hope so," he smiled.

"That's not what I meant."

"I know."

She closed her eyes and began to hum again. Thomas believed in her music and the story it told. Suddenly nothing else mattered. He began to move more quickly, thrusting deeper into her. When he looked at her face he was momentarily confused by the dim light, and for one brief instant it was Bernadette who gazed up at him. He paused.

"What is it?"

He began to move again, wrapping his arms around her and holding her tightly. "Yes; I will come," he said, choking back fresh tears.

Hannah's song filled the room. Thomas clung to her fiercely, fucking her with all his body and heart and soul. He joined in the melody, throwing back his head and adding his own story to the song.

The first hint of a breeze sprung up from nowhere.

Rick Cadger *is married with three children and lives in Bedfordshire. His fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies. He is currently learning the Hindi and Punjabi languages.*

I sensed you in the fog, not far away,
and hurried on along the chapel path
and found the door that led down to the crypt.
The last steps faltered past the roots of walls.
My light revealed a catacomb, a ghost
of dust — a shifting cerement — below
the roof that still descended as I walked.
Then crawling, I imagined you — your eyes
half-closed — your muttered words, "I'm going to come
on you," again. I found only the earth
that buried you. My voice called in the dark:
then I sat up in bed, still terrified
(I heard a voice that answered from my dream),
awake beneath the weight of you at last.

The Vampire Bride

Andrew Jordan

Andrew Jordan *is the editor of the magazine 10th Muse, and has published five collections over the years – most notably 'The Invisible Children' from Stride (1991).*

THE FOOD OF LOVE

MARK McLAUGHLIN

Map moved through the weed-choked outskirts of the city, thinking about manna. Deep within, she felt her need for more. She saw a gray slough in the distance and considered dipping into it. She took a few steps forward, then stopped. Shallow, still waters held no manna. And yet the slough looked inviting... To stop the urge, she stared into the sun for a moment to clear her mind.

A mewing echoed within a brick building coated with gray filth. Map listened — the mewing grew louder. A long, hairless cat wiggled onto the ledge of a ground floor window and stared at Map with eyes like yellow marbles.

"Chigger!" A deep voice cried out in the building. "Here Chigger, Chigger, Chigger!"

Map hid behind a rotting fence. Soon a man came to the window and picked up his pet. His head was large and round, with a thick tangle of black hair. His eyes were dark and slightly bulbous.

Map shouted from behind the fence. "Hello, sir."

The man shaded his eyes and looked out the window. "Who's there? You shouldn't be outside—it's too sunny."

Map pressed an eye to a crack in the fence. "Map," she called out.

The man laughed. "A map won't do you any good. There's nowhere to go." He kissed his cat on its smooth head and carried it back into the dark.

Map crept along the fence. The urge for manna throbbed in her belly. The man made other parts throb.

The dark yellow grass felt crisp under her feet. She pulled up a few strands and chewed on them, then spit them out. Too sour. The wind blew a large plastic bag toward her. She caught it and examined it for holes. Surprisingly, it was in good shape... Perfect for carrying manna.

Soon Map heard the sound of running water. She hurried past soft, twisted trees and collapsed houses until she came to a dark, bubbling river. Frothy blue-gray masses floated with the current.

Map filled her belly and her sack with semi-solid chunks of the froth. How sweet, how delicious — and how plentiful! All rivers abounded with manna. Sometimes, when Map wandered too far from a river and went without manna, she became stupid. This time, she had retained a good deal of intelligence. Enough to grab the plastic sack. Enough to remember where the man lived.

She gazed out over the river. Her last husband had explained the cycle to her. Over the years, rain washed chemical stuff into the rivers from fields and landfills. Eventually the skies grew thin and the sun grew strong. When the strong new sun hit the rivers, the stuff cooked and made the froth. That husband had called it Satan's manna. Map wasn't sure who Satan was, but it was good of him to share.

Her husband had thought that manna was poisonous. He didn't know that manna made wonderful things happen, and Map didn't tell him. Like her other

husbands, he had died from staying out in the sun too long. Map loved the sun, and thought it was too bad that it made husbands get all blistered and smelly.

Map slipped behind the fence. "Sir? Are you home?" she called out.

After a moment, the dark-haired man came to the window. "Who is it?"

"May I come in? I've been traveling for days." Map stepped out from behind the fence. Tall and beautiful she was, with long red hair and almond-shaped eyes. "I'm afraid. Everyone I know is dead. Are you a good person, sir? I think so. I can tell by your eyes."

"Come in," the man said. "Get out of the sun."

Map walked to the building and entered. The carpet of the front hall was streaked with gray lichens. The man peered at her from around a door jamb.

"Who are you?" he said. "What's in the sack?"

"My name is Pam. These are my things. Private things." She clutched the top of the plastic bag. "Please don't try to take them away."

"I'm Daniel. Don't worry, I won't take your things." He smiled broadly – his teeth were large, white and crooked. "I've got lots of food. Are you hungry?"

He led Map to a room filled with canned goods. Map scanned the pictures on the labels—peaches, green beans, olives, salmon, and more.

"This building used to be a shelter for the homeless," he said. "Most of the cans are still pretty good."

The cat writhed into the room and rubbed against its master's leg. Daniel picked it up and petted it. "Dod, Dod," the cat muttered.

"I taught him that," Daniel said. "His name is Chigger."

"Your cat is very smart," Map said. "You are a good person. See how much your cat loves you."

"Dod, Dod," Chigger purred. "Dod, Dod, Dod." It licked at Daniel's chin with a pale yellow tongue.

Weeks passed. The days grew even hotter.

Map hid her sack in a cluttered storage room. She secretly began to feed Chigger small bits of manna.

She told Daniel that she did not like to talk about her past, and he said that he understood. She found out that Daniel used to cut people's hair. That had been his job, he said – for fun, he used to throw pots. He laughed when Map asked who he threw them at. He explained that to throw a pot meant to spin clay on a wheel and shape it into something useful.

Map thought that pot-throwing sounded like a good thing.

Once, when it was cloudy, Daniel went outside to see if he could find any clay. He brought home a bucket of thick, gray ooze. He didn't have a wheel, so they each shaped a pot by hand. Daniel admired Map's work and told her that she had exceptional talent.

Chigger learned to call Map "Mom." The cat grew large – so large that Daniel could no longer lift the creature. He cut back on the amount of canned salmon he fed his pet, and still the cat piled on rolls of fat.

One morning, Map curled up next to Daniel on a pile of mouldering coats. "We should make love," she said.

"You're a beautiful woman, Pam," he said. "But I don't feel like it. I haven't felt that way for years. Just as well. I wouldn't want to bring a baby into a dead world."

"You would make a good father, Daniel. Chigger loves you."

"Hell, any babies born today would probably end up looking like Chigger. Big and hairless and ugly."

Map shook her head. "You think too many wrong things. Chigger is beautiful

because he loves us. Chigger! Come here, Chigger!"

Chigger lumbered into the room and threw himself into their laps. "Mommy. Dod, Doddy."

"I have a surprise for you, Daniel," Map said. "Chigger! Who do you love?"

The huge cat worked the muscles of his fat cleft lips. "Chiggy lubs Doddy and Mommy."

"How can he do that?" Daniel whispered, squirming out from under his pet. "I thought I was doing good to get him to repeat one syllable, like a parrot."

Chigger blinked. "Doddy lubs Chiggy?"

"You stop that!" Daniel clapped his hand over the cat's mouth. "Cats aren't that smart!"

Map slapped his hand away. "You are so mean! Chigger and I wanted to surprise you and now the fun is spoiled. Look, Chigger's mouth is bleeding."

"Doddy hurd Chiggy!" cried the cat.

Daniel ran from the room. Map and Chigger stared after him.

The cat tilted his head to one side and sobbed.

"Don't be sad." Map pulled a small piece of manna from her pocket. "Look what I have for you."

That night, while Daniel slept, Map and Chigger slipped out of the house. They went to the river, feasted on manna and refilled Map's sack.

"Do you think Doddy would like manna?" Map said. "I've been eating it for years."

"Doddy silly," Chigger said.

Map nodded. "Doddy is very silly. He doesn't know what is good and what is bad. We will have to show him."

As they walked through the night, Map found a dilapidated shop with a mannequin in the window. Instructing Chigger to wait for her, she entered the shop and began to search. A shriveled cadaver in a polyester jumpsuit leered at her from behind the counter. In a back room, she found a bundle wrapped in heavy plastic.

Map and the cat did not return to their home with Daniel for several days.

One morning, Daniel entered the kitchen and found Map preparing a large breakfast. He took his seat at the table. "Where were you? Where's Chigger?"

"We had things to do." Map smiled. "Chigger is probably asleep. Shall I go wake him?"

The man shook his head. "I'm sorry I was so mean. I missed both of you. Is Chigger's lip better?"

"Of course. Young boys heal so fast." Map opened a can of fruit drink and filled three glasses.

"Chigger is not a boy. He's the latest in a long line of mutant cats."

"You are so silly, Doddy." A lanky blond boy entered the room and sat by Daniel's side. "Look at me! I'm a boy and you're my Doddy."

Map placed a bowl of manna in front of Daniel, and he pushed the bowl away in disgust. He narrowed his eyes at the boy. "You can't fool me. I can still see the outline of Chigger if I squint real hard. He's bigger now..."

"Doddy is so silly, Mommy! Doddy is so funny!" The little boy ran a tanned hand through his curly locks and began to laugh.

Map began to laugh, too. "Wait here, Daniel. I'll be right back." Map rushed to the storage room and threw the wedding dress over her head. It took a bit of wiggling, but she managed to work her way into the ill-fitting garment.

She could still hear Daniel talking to Chigger. "I can see through this trick of yours," he said. "All I have to do is concentrate."

Map swept back into the kitchen, white lace swirling in her wake. Still concentrating, Daniel turned from Chigger to the one he knew as Pam.

"Oh God, Pam." He squinted hard, *hard.* "You had me fooled all along."

"I'm sorry, Mommy," Chigger said. "I did it all wrong and Doddy figured us out."

"Not to worry, Chigger," Map said. She smoothed the ruffles of lace over her thorax with a chitinous claw. Her mandibles twitched furiously. "Your Doddy doesn't know what is good and what is bad. So we must show him. Right now."

Chigger reared up out of his seat and threw Daniel to the floor. The wedding gown ripped as Map's glistening stinger sprang forth. A milky drop of poison fell from the cylinder's tip. Daniel's shrieks were muffled by the vestigial limb that Chigger slapped over his mouth.

"Remember what to say, Chigger," said the enormous mud dauber wasp as she slid the pointed tube into the base of Daniel's spine. She squirted once, twice. Not enough to kill him. Just enough to keep him from ever running away.

"I now pronounce you man and wife." Chigger nodded happily. "Everything is good now. You may kiss Doddy."

Mark McLaughlin *lives in Iowa where he is editor of The Urbanite, a magazine of surreal city fiction and poetry. His own fiction has appeared in such publications as Tekeli-li!, Not One Of Us, Dark Infinity, Mystic Fiction, Argonaut, and The Year's Best Horror Stories XXI.*

HARD TO FIND by JOEL LANE

Sound is a bastard to work with.
It's too human. The severed chords
fall in the image of believers, those
defined by their needs. An audience,
an obsessive lover, the blind unborn.

It's not a style. Muttered words,
violent guitars; you only raise
your voice when screaming. Now
you've pieced together the mirror,
but the image is still broken.

Mind. The white noise of pain
reduces you to an echo, your trace
preserved in the mix. The last sound
you hear is not a human voice.
They'll suck the hole in your head

to feed their loss. A child cries.
Nothing is transformed. All this week,
the rain tastes bitter and the sky
itches, trying to close itself up.
Your silence will go platinum.

Joel Lane *had a collection entitled The Earth Wire & Other Stories published recently by Egerton Press: £6.99 from 5 Windsor Court, 24 Avenue Road, London N15 5JQ.*

CAVEFISH

NEAL ASHER

An amphoric chuckling of water and skating gems of cavefish fleeing the light. His throat was sore from the screaming as he gasped against the cold stone at the edge of the pool, and now he felt the pain of his bruises. Wendy released her hold but Johnson still kept on the armlock.

"Alright..." he managed. "Alright."

Johnson cautiously released him and stepped back. He scrabbled at the stone and pushed himself upright. His light found Jane for a moment and he quickly turned it away from the look of contempt on her face. In a way the horrible embarrassment alleviated his fear, though he knew it was still there waiting to leap up and click the switches that had driven him to try and tear and hammer his way out through solid rock.

Johnson looked away from him to the pool, the beam from the light strapped round his head stabbing down into the water.

"Water's rising."

Casually laconic. Mitch felt his gut turn over and clenched down on a scream trying to claw its way up his throat. He picked up his rock hammer, tucked it into his belt, tried to banish nascent panic by analysing why he was down here. Yes, he was a geologist and there had been the promise of some interesting helictites, but it was Jane, it came back to her. In a fit of machismo he had agreed to crawl down into the pits of the Earth for 'fun'.

"Must be a storm up there. Nice to be out of the rain, but we'd better be getting back," said Jane, sensible, athletic, desirable Jane, with water droplets beaded on her perfect skin. He wondered what it was he had found so desirable about her. When he looked at her now, in this dark place, with its only hints of life being ugly blind corpse-skin cavefish and flaccid worms like thin bits of intestine, he could find nothing attractive. He found her threatening, sly, alien.

The three turned away from him to retrace their steps, or rather their crawl, and he knew they would leave him now without a second thought. Or was that it? Why had they wanted him down here? He fought paranoia as his guts churned and forced himself dogged step by step to follow them. Ahead was the next narrowing; stalactites were dripping fangs in the pit-mouth. He struggled for control again and almost had it when an echoing boom came from the depths on a blast of frigid wind.

"What was that?"

He was too scared to be ashamed of the whine in his voice.

No one replied. After pulling on her thick gloves in a businesslike manner Wendy led off into the travertine throat and the other two quickly followed. Mitch noticed the grim look on Johnson's face. They didn't care if he followed or not.

The throat gulped them down at a steep angle that Mitch knew, in a vague way, would eventually level out and turn up again, up to the chimney, the daylight world, and sanity. He knew that if

he lost his companions he would never get out. With something chuckling madly inside him he ducked in and followed. Jane squirmed ahead of him in a tunnel lens and he felt himself side slipping out of reality as he tried to control his fear. Suddenly he lost it and did not know where he was. How long it lasted he had no idea. The chafing of his knee pads and of the straps of his small pack brought him out of it. He turned the beam of his torch down and saw water trickling past. It had not been there before.

"Wait! Wait for me!"

They were around the next bend.

"Shut up and keep moving!" Jane hissed.

Mitch sobbed for a moment as she moved on. He looked down again and saw the water had become a gush. The scream rose as he scrambled forward. He wanted to tear at the walls. Then, he was stepping out after the others into a cathedral of a cavern. They moved ahead of him as he panted and stared around. He looked up and his light picked out a diamond rain from above. He could almost believe himself below a starlit night-time sky, only above were millions of tonnes of rock poised to crush him to nothing, and all around him stalagmites crouched like deformed rabbits. The water was splashing round his ankles now, wetting his socks.

"How are you doing?" Jane asked neutrally.

With gratitude he looked to her, then he froze in shock. His fear bolted him to the stone. Her face... What he had at first assumed to be droplets of water were in fact small scales, quivering as they grew.

"Fine..." he choked. "Fine."

Jane moved on to the next narrowing. Fear was a roll of sheet lead in his stomach. He had to go on. Human or not they were his only way out. He took one dragging step, then another. Soon he was with them. There was the hole. It was a four foot diameter bore with six inches of water rushing through it. No, he couldn't. He looked at Johnson and saw that his only visible change was a slight bulging of the eyes and a pallor to the skin. He couldn't go through. He just couldn't.

"Come on," said Wendy and ducked through with the water propelling her. With a start Mitch realised how her thick gloves concealed the webbing growing between her fingers. Johnson followed her.

"No... No I..."

He turned and Jane was behind him, waiting. Her face. With a groan he ducked into the hole, felt the water drag him down, then out, into a sharply sloping cavern. He struggled to his feet in what had become a torrent as Jane came out after him, retracting her fins and opening her tail back into legs again.

"We'll have to go under!" Johnson yelled.

Never. He knew now. They wanted him under the water. They wanted to drown him. There wasn't much food in this barren environment and they would nibble on his water bleached and washed flesh until nothing but bones remained, bones to fall to the bottom and be eternally ground into white grovel.

"Come on, Mitch," Jane bubbled at him.

He shuddered and the shudder became a horrible giggle. His rock hammer came in from the side as if of its own volition. There was a sickening crunch. Jane dropped. Someone had cut her strings. Crouching, Mitch brought the hammer down again, and again. It was like that fishing trip when he'd hit a cod so hard its eyeballs had popped out. Jane's did the same. She gulped like a goldfish as she died.

The others made weird screeching noises when they saw what he had done. He waved his hammer at them then lost

his bravery and turned and fled back into the torrent. He had to get out of the water. They could get him there when they were fully transformed. Into the tunnel, fighting his way against the water, hooking the hammer into crevices. At any moment he expected claws to tear at him. Something grabbed at his ankle. He looked back into that single glaring eye in the middle of Johnson's forehead and kicked back. Johnson disappeared with a yell. He had to get away. Get away.

The cathedral cavern was there. He waded across it coughing water from his lungs and looked around wildly. There: a boulder by the wall with stalagmites on it like melted church candles. He climbed up upon it and with his rock hammer tightly clutched directed the beam of his light down at the rising water and shuddered as he gasped for breath.

It seemed as if an age passed, yet he knew how deceptive time could be in a place like this. His light was still working so perhaps it had been only ten minutes, twenty... He shuddered again as he realised the deadlines of his situation. This was no good. He could not stay here and wait for them. If the water did not rise high enough to drown him they would still come, sometime. He had to fight back. With a new determination he pushed himself back into the water and headed for the narrow throat of a cave. The water did not seem as cold. It seemed almost comforting. He ducked under, dived, allowed the flow to take him.

In the sloping cavern the water was a metre deep and Jane was gone. Who was he to question what would happen to her? He reckoned there would be no burial, no funeral. They were not the kind for that. Perhaps some ritual would accompany their ingestion of the corpse, but he doubted it. Standing in the water with the beam of his light growing dimmer, and with his long fingernails driven into crevices to stop the water dragging him along, Mitch wondered how he must now proceed. They were ahead of him somewhere so he did not want to run into an ambush. He must know how far ahead... Abruptly he stooped down so he was up to his waist in the water. He dipped his head and swilled some of it past his teeth. Salt and iron; the traces of Jane's blood. He licked his lips, ran the tip of his tongue over the points of his teeth, then lowered himself further, until the water was just below his eyes. It seemed comfortable that way, and easier to listen for the sounds far ahead, carried by the water, and the womblike stone all around him.

"Oh Jesus!"

"Let her go, she's wasted. Let her go."

"Oh Jesus!"

Sobbing...

Mitch tilted his head, but could hear no better. He realised in an instant that he was feeling the sounds rather than hearing them. Of course. It was the better way. With a deep glassy calm overcoming him he probed the opening below his jaw bone and along the side of his neck. Delicate gill surfaces vibrated under his claw. He swam out into the current and let it carry him after the others, and the taste of blood.

***Neal Asher** is thirty, unmarried, and when not having to work for a living, spends his time writing. He has had fiction taken by BBR, Premonitions, Works, Dementia 13, Threads, Alternaties, Grotesque, and many more. A novella, Mindgames: Fool's Mate, was published by Club 199, and he currently has a fantasy trilogy in the hands of an agent.*

***Dave Mooring** is this issue's extremely talented featured artist - see the cover, pages 19 and 40. He also produced very popular covers for TTA1 and TTA3.*

DAY BILLION

PJL HINDER

1

The houses. You see them over the crest of the ridge, and the angles are the first thing you notice. The obtuse angles of slate roofs. The right angles of corner walls. Gardens that resemble circuit diagrams – concrete paths, ruler-edged lawns, trapezoidal flowerbeds. Three-quarters hidden, peeping from behind bushes which are cut into pyramids and cubes, you can see the rectilinear glint of windows. This is a complete village of perfectly expressed vertices, their cold, sharp shadows unmoving in the pink light of sunrise.

Go down now. Risk your mind between the jaws.

Ceramic people, with painted cheeks and jewel-box eyes, are motionless at the wheels of their cars, or in mid-stride; posting a letter, holding the hands of their children (it's all part of the monument). Ask them and they will tell you: it's the exaggeration we need, the glittering edge of technology, the newness of it all. And it does look new, in the morning, in this pink light. If you still had human eyes, you would weep.

A low rumbling sound crawls around the hills: the dawn offensive has begun in the war being fought on the plains. Like a butterfly sipping at a flower, you reach out and touch lightly on the aura of metal and fear, the pain of bones splintered by bullets. You decide you don't like it. OK, OK; this is a free country. You don't have to like it. You can vote against it, if you want to.

She's perfect.

You know it at once: it's the trim orange brickwork, the painted door, the symmetrical windows—and through the glass, a tantalising glimpse of lace curtains, pinned back against the frames. Open the gate, and walk along the path, between the rose bushes spotted with dew. Knock on the door, lightly, with your metal fist.

The door swings open. The house welcomes you: the air-conditioner breathes a girlish sigh, the rooms light up with the small electric lamps of a smile. You respond with a preprogrammed combination of your own: boyish, but a little masculine and superior, it emanates from the clanking oil-and-steel of your robot body like radio. You repeat the signals to each other from time to time as you examine the property.

Her rooms and corridors are neat and modern: grey furnishings, tinted white walls. Polished frames with glassed-in sketches of ladies with parasols, gardens with lilac trees, or green, lazy rivers. A slight clean chemical scent in the air. You view her lounge; her dining room; master bedroom (with the huge wall mirror and the pink counterpane); 2 x children's bedrooms (with rocking-horse, mobiles, books on pop music); pink ceramic bathroom and separate WC. In the kitchen, you chatter of the possibility of a serving-hatch connecting to the dining area. You design it together, an evenly-stressed rectangle framed in white pine – and redesign it – and redesign it again.

Both of you are feeling the itch of desire.

She tells you about the local climate. Lying on the beige carpet in her lounge, metal arms chocked against a wall, you absorb the facts: sunlight hours, incident angles, cloud amounts, precipitation rates, mean wind velocities, maximum and minimum temperatures. The beauty of the numbers, their precision, begins to get you high. You show off. You describe the special alloys used in the construction of your torso and limb joints, the workings of the valves in your two-stroke petrol engine, your special twin carburettor with fuel injection. She laughs at you, at your narcissism. But you know that she's excited too.

This is the moment.

Stand up. Approach the wall opposite the window, the one warmed by the sunlight, and touch it with your cool steel hand. She shivers. Rotate the blades of your fingers, and, gently at first, begin to strip back the wallpaper. She moans.

Later, in the darkness, amidst the curled leaves of fallen paper and the broken soil of plaster, she whispers, "I love you."

2

There is a balcony, overlooking a sea, with black wooden railings and a floor of rough planking covered with raffia mats. There are two wicker chairs, one a rocker, one padded with a green-and-red cushion. A man and a woman are sweating in the sun. He wears brown sandals, white shorts, a blue and white check shirt, and sits on the rocking chair. She wears green shorts and a bikini top. Between them is a chess board, crystal pieces standing on squares of white and black marble. Flecks of prismatic light are inanimate amongst the grey shadows of the pieces.

It is Y's turn to exercise: she gets up and paces the balcony, turns the white shells on the flat top of the railing over and back again, gazes down at the sea flowing in and out of hollows in the rocks, sips her drink. X stares at the board, his leisurely brain computing and recomputing the possible combinations. In a few days, perhaps, he will make his move.

He notices your presence, hovering in shadow-form. Folds his brown hands together and addresses you.

"Chess used to be about fighting and killing. Pieces were taken from the board. Kings were checkmated. And that was the end of it. Finished. You had to start from scratch. The same old opening position, the same blank lines of pieces. Everything you'd planned, done, struggled for – all of it wasted.

"But we've got around that. It's quite simple, when you think about it. All you need to do is change the rules. So now when a piece is captured, we put it back on the board – only in a different place. No-one dies, nothing is ever lost. This version of the game is permanent."

This is the familiar speech that has been made on this balcony for longer than you have existed. The house behind the balcony has been taken down, rebuilt, reoccupied. The sea has eroded the cliffs, so that the balcony now floats far above them. A lagoon has appeared, and disappeared. But the speech, like the game, has remained. The words never change, and you know they never will. The players will still be here, when the balcony is part of an island in the sea, an oasis in the desert, a clearing in the forest, a capsule floating free in space. Your friends have promised you this. That's why they're your friends. They give you a sense of security.

X gulps his drink; you taste through his tongue the sweetness and the lime, the blurred burn of alcohol.

"I hear you're thinking of getting married," he observes.

"It seems likely."

"Nice thing, marriage." He observes Y covertly as she stands looking over the rail at the sea. His eyes follow the curve of her shoulder, the blades of her back. You feel his lust.

Y turns and winks at you over her shoulder, takes a sip of her drink. "Nectar!"

They both laugh. The nectar referred to is desire: you know that fulfilment is outside the rules of their personal game.

In a whimsy, X picks up a pawn and moves it. After a while, the woman turns, catching her amber necklace in her hand, taking another sip of her drink. She studies the board.

Politely, you leave.

3

Wedding day.

The small church is manufactured fresh from breeze-blocks, and the windows make a sharp-edged glare on the new stone. The dust of construction still hangs in the air, chafing your intakes. Your metal feet ring on the aisle as you move ponderously towards the altar. Ahead of you, imaged as if she were kneeling, the House is a whirl of white lace and tiles and panes of glass. She giggles as you arrive beside her, murmurs that you look like an astronaut in your massive armour. The priest, black robes and white collar below his cheap plastic face, holds up a portable cassette recorder which plays the standard words to you. You each repeat them, with solemn care. Then you sign the contract which binds you until death.

As you leave, the ground shakes, dislodging a clatter of fragments from the rubble heaps around the church. After an interval, you hear the long roar of missiles impacting amongst the cities of the plain.

You return to her, itching with lust, but the refugees are a problem. Even as you eagerly rip the tiles from her roof, they are winding up the road from desolated townships, thin, dark, injured bodies stark against the white dust.

"Can't we help them?" she asks.

"It's not in the contract," you observe. "We made our contract, they made theirs."

And indeed they can't even see you. They pass by without turning their heads, their white eyes hollow. At the House's insistence, you put a bowl of fruit on the wall by the road, heaped high with bananas, mangoes and peaches; but they never look at it, never reach out.

She cries. You must do something.

So you walk into the road and hold the bowl of fruit out to them. They shuffle around you as if you were a lump of rock. In desperation, you pick up a banana and thrust it into the nearest hand, an old woman's. The knobbed fingers tremble around it. The weak eyes slowly focus. Understanding dawns, and grimly she begins to peel the fruit.

A hand grasps her arm. An elbow jabs into her ribs. People begin to shout and rush forward. They wrench at her — "why should you have—" — "it is not yours only, it is for everyone" — "we need more than you." As you watch, they knock her down and trample her. Others jostle forward. A man falls, with the blade of a knife protruding from his belly, curiously bloodless. Another man in army fatigues, looking young and frightened, shoulders his machine-gun, opens fire. There are screams. Bullets ricochet off your armour. Bodies fall, twitching. The soldier runs out of ammunition; the crowd rush him, and club him with his gun until his skull breaks. Then they go on beating the lifeless flesh, tearing at it with their bare hands, lick their fingers, gobble down the fragments — then, frenzied, turn on each

other. You struggle to stop the carnage, but are hampered by your invisibility, your sheer metal clumsiness, the sharp blades on your fingers.

More soldiers arrive, and they have no such limitations. When they have finished, the road is filled with human carcasses, and the blood runs in the guttering like water after a storm.

You and the House collapse into each other. You ignore the hungry flies, the bulldozers digging the mass graves, the half dead children begging in the dust. They're not part of your business any more.

Career through her body: break down the inner walls, force joists into the ceilings, take out the picture rails. She screams with orgasm. And you scream. You work harder, faster. Set yourself targets. But whatever you do it's not enough, you want more she wants more and your joints overheat, every movement is burning but you don't stop won't stop can't stop

burning burning burning

4

Events on the balcony.

A young man runs in, and collides with the table, scattering the chess pieces everywhere. The visitor has tangled brown hair and protruding blue eyes, and is dressed in anachronistic clothing, nineteenth rather than twentieth century, black and angular. He smells of sweat and whisky. Tugging at his hair, he jerks his gaze from one to the other of his bewildered hosts.

"You don't understand—how can you? —the intensity. No safeties—you can feel death next to you—just here—"

He leaps sideways, perilous at the low railing, knocking shells, scent bottles, colorsticks over the edge. Y opens her mouth to speak, but the stranger will not be interrupted.

"Pulse-beats! — God, even to feel your blood flowing is a miracle—every second that you stay alive in something as fragile as this—"

The stranger tears open his funeral jacket and his shirt, beats his fists against his bare chest. Climbs up onto the railing, balancing awkwardly on shoes made from buffalo leather. He bawls at the sky, as if he were speaking to the nineteenth-century God.

"Has it ever occurred to you that the concept 'eternal' and the concept 'life' are mutually incompatible?"

"No," says Y, with a Cheshire-cat grin at X.

The visitor stares at her, utter misery on his face.

"Has *anything* ever occurred to you? Does anyone think at all any more?"

And he's gone; his body has bundled itself over the rail. When Y looks down (a few minutes later), he is lying on his back, quite still. The water is flowing in and out of his mouth, as if he had somehow become equipped to breathe it, but his eyes have glazed over.

"He seems to be dead for a while," observes X. He sets up the pieces again on the board: the position is exactly the same as before. "Your move, my sweet."

5

Black smoke hangs over the plains, and even here on the slopes its petrol-laden stink has invaded the forests. The air is oven-hot, as thick as rubber, and the sky has turned to glass. The refugees are jumbled bones in the road: a few whole skeletons are still covered with the last rags of flesh.

"Is there anything you need?"

The House has changed: she bulges with extensions, dormer windows, Georgian porches. Her neatness, her youthful

symmetry, are long gone. The beds in the garden have become ragged, lifeless; the brown lawn is gouged by the repeated passage of your feet.

"Is there anything you need?"

You too have changed: your paintwork is chipped and has lost its gloss. Your exhaust is black with wasted oil, and your coolant temperature is dangerously high. Pistons misfire, and you feel the first insidious workings of rust.

"Is there anything you need?"

And she'll go on asking. It's not that she wants an answer; she only wants you to speak. To convince her, if only for a moment, that there are still things worth saying, here, now, between two lovers, on day billion of the Christian era.

"I need to start again."

Yes. If only there were a way of starting again. If only you could clean the equations off the blackboard, and forget that you ever knew the solutions. If only—

You look at her walls, speculatively. Raise your hammers.

But listen. Do you hear it?

No, it's not imagination.

There. The deep, soothing drum of thunder.

Turn, and see the cloud, sailing over the ridge, as huge as the dream of a starship. Light flickers around it, opening hatchways and corridors, filled with soft streamers of vapour. You stare at it, desire it, with all the intensity of prayer.

Rain comes. The huge drops beat the coolness into you, wash away the irritant dust. You run, run for glory. Climb a tall pine, your finger-blades cutting into its bark. Thrust up your hands into the beating rain. Wish the lightning down on you. Wish—wish—*wish*—

It strikes, and you're free. You fall from the blazing tree, damaging your shock absorbers. Legs grinding, you stumble back to the House, begin to break her walls. She screams as the bricks shatter, but you don't care about that—you're liberating her now. Rocks fall on your head: red lights fill your visor display. Connections break, and suddenly you can feel the humid air touching your own skin, and you can see with your own eyes. It's imperfect, but it's real.

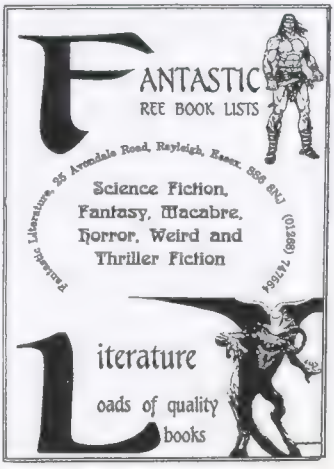
With a scream of triumph, you realise that you're still human.

Peel back the shell of the robot, struggle out of it onto the broken stones. (And she, too, is rising like a ghost from the darkness of the stairwell, grimy and trembling, but free.)

There are distant, unbearably brilliant, flashes. Through a ragged gap in the wall you can see fireballs like white-and-orange roses opening above the cities. When the shockwave reaches the house the wall tears like a curtain and pieces of it fall on you. Bones shatter, and the pain, the blood choking your throat, promise death but—

—but the machinery of the resurrection works, as it always does.

PJL Hinder *is one of our finest writers of modern SF. He has had stories published in numerous magazines here and abroad, and has lately been enjoying some success as a novel writer. He lives in Bristol.*



FLOATERS

TIM LEBBON

As Philip came and Kate squirmed on the ground beneath him, he heard the voices for the first time. Alongside the thumping of blood in his ears and Kate's panting, there were whispers insinuating themselves on his consciousness, calls to a better place, pleas for company. They tickled his perception so gently that he barely registered the sound, but their meaning superseded any emotion he felt at that moment. He flung himself from Kate and turned to look at the pool, hardly hearing her muffled cry of frustration. The surface of the water was a dull metal grey, undisturbed save for the rippling impact of insects. The voices were still there, winging across the waters from somewhere near the middle of the seemingly bottomless pool, wetly announcing their intentions and desires to Philip.

Kate sat up, shocked and confused at the sudden sight of her boyfriend staring out over the water, his penis still shrinking. "What? Is someone watching?" she asked. Maybe he'd heard someone. The old quarry was a regular haunt for lovers, and conversely for Peeping Toms. She gathered her clothes to her chest, struggled to pull on her knickers without having to stand. Damn it, he'd leapt away right at the end, just before she was going to get something out of it. He rarely did that. "Phil!" she pleaded. "What is it? What's up?"

Philip turned, surprised. He had actually forgotten where he was and who he was with, just for an instant. The voices, quiet yet so full of purpose, had almost hypnotised him. He watched Kate as she struggled to dress herself without revealing anything intimate to anyone who may be watching. Her eyes were on his, querying, confused.

The voices stopped. They did not simply fade away, dwindling like an echo into nothing. They stopped cold, so that Philip had a sense that the consciousness that spoke them was still there, waiting, observing. A pause, rather than an end.

The expression on Philip's face caused Kate to delay in her dressing. He looked different. Not scared, or violent, just... distant. But distant in the most extreme sense. It was almost as if he wasn't there at all.

"Phil!"

"Huh?" His eyes refocussed, his mind returned, and he saw Kate before him, half naked and seemingly terrified. The image caused him to smile through the memory of the voices. "Sorry, Kate. Sorry. Yeah, come on, let's go."

He dressed, and they scrambled up the wall of the quarry together, the path carved into the hillside by a decade of ramblers and lovers. When they reached the top, and vaulted the excuse for a fence which kept nothing out but sheep, Philip glanced back. The pool in the centre of the water-filled quarry looked like the pupil of some gigantic eye. In several places, Philip thought he saw vague shapes floating at random on the surface. He pointed them out to Kate but she could not see them, and anyway

she wanted to go home. It was getting cold.

Philip cast one final longing look back at the surface of the water, where shapes forming no ripples or defect on the sheen seemed to invite him to return for closer inspection.

They left, strolling across the moor to the car parked off the pitted roadway. By the time they reached the vehicle the clouds had covered the sun, and a fine rain was falling.

They drove back into town and the further they went from the moor, the greater the feeling of unease nestling in Philip's stomach. He slouched in the passenger seat as Kate slid and splashed the car through the deluge. Conversation was minimal, and he spent the time brooding over what he had heard, agonising over what he thought he had seen in the dark waters. And wanting to go back.

They arrived outside his parents' modest house; he gave Kate a perfunctory peck on the cheek and opened the car door.

"What have I done?" Kate asked. Her eyes were wide and pleading, but her voice still held a trace of anger. He had no right to ignore her like this – take her to the quarry, screw her, not speak another word since...

Philip turned in his seat. The same blank expression still scarred his face. "Nothing. No, course not. I've had a great afternoon. I'm just a bit... down, that's all. Don't feel like saying much. It's not you. You know how I get sometimes."

"You've been like this since we left the quarry. What's up?"

Philip scratched his stubble, let his eyes drift away from Kate so that he did not have to lie to her face. "Nothing's up, honest. I just don't like that place anymore. Too many prying eyes."

Kate smiled cheekily. "You used to like the thought of someone watching. We used to perform as if there was."

Philip shrugged. "Maybe I've grown out of it. Listen, let's write off today, alright? I'm in a bad mood, but I'll be okay tomorrow, I promise."

She hated being palmed off like this. There was something on his mind he wasn't telling her, and he thought she was stupid enough to believe him when he said it was nothing. He sometimes treated her like a kid.

Before Kate could say any more, Philip had left the car and trotted down the driveway to the house, shoulders hunched against the rain.

Kate watched him to the front door, waiting for him to turn around and give her a farewell wave. But he went straight in without looking back, and she drove home miserably, the wave unused.

Nighttime on the moors is strange. Even a sliver of a moon, peeking through a rent in the cloud cover, will instil the soggy ground with a luminosity almost bright enough to read by. Whispering mists come out at night to travel across their old hunting grounds of marsh and bog and heather and shale. Most of them are starved nowadays by civilisation and safety fences, but occasionally an errant soul will find a lonely end on the moors, drowning in the bogs or breaking limbs and freezing to death on the great slopes.

Philip found the nighttime no more intimidating then the day as he rode across the moor on his bicycle. Whatever the time, the place imparted a feeling of strength, complete power over anything mortal. Sometimes he thought the moor itself would flip over and crush the life out of every parasitic man and woman daring to dwell there, starting again refreshed and renewed, and suffering nothing in the process.

At other times, a sense of consciousness seemed to permeate everything, a mocking mind which found the trivial meandering of humans over its surface so inconsequential as to merit no more than passing attention.

He pedalled furiously, aware of the dangers yet keen to reach his goal, and he soon found himself on the long, slow gradient which eventually led to the quarry.

The terrible feeling of unease which had been with him since that afternoon was still there, but complementing it was the expanding knowledge that it could be cured here tonight; the mystery which inspired it could be solved.

He stumbled from the pedals, dropped the bike and carried on running until he stood at the tattered fence bounding the quarry edge. The night held its breath as he gazed into the dark depths below.

The quarter moon was reflected in the eye of the quarry, shimmering slightly as ripples passed over its surface. Philip frowned at this. He felt no breeze, and the rain had stopped. Yet the water moved.

A breath tickled his ear and he turned with a start. The air next to him was empty, yet it reverberated with the whispers of a dozen voices, overlapping each other in their keenness to be heard. Some were male, some female, a few kind, others harsh. Yet they all came from nowhere, impressing themselves on his eardrums with infinitely varied pressures, inviting his company.

Scared, still scared, but calmed by the influence of the voices, Philip began to make his way down the narrow path.

By daylight the path was dangerous, cut as it was into the continuously eroding face of an open wound in the land. People had fallen from it. Some had been hurt. On the few occasions he and Kate had come here for some privacy, they had both had second thoughts when faced with the treacherous descent. Inevitably, however, they had tackled the path and had never been injured. Maybe even then the call of the quarry was present, if intangible.

At night, the path was little less than deadly. Attempting it was suicidal. Yet ten minutes later, Philip stood at the base of the cliff, where he and Kate had enjoyed each other that afternoon. He had felt so confident in his descent that he had not slipped once, as if some invisible hand was rapidly guiding his feet to the correct places on the cliff path. Only now, realising what he had just done, did he start to shake.

The voices sang again, caressing the fears from him with their beckoning cadences. He smiled, felt a warmth energising his cold wet limbs, and stepped towards the water.

A splash from further out in the pool caused him to pause. The voices receded for a second, their final syllables raised in query. It was long enough for Philip to scan the pond with his own eyes, and see what was there.

He could make out several shapes on the surface of the water, hardly moving, just floating. There were four he was sure of, and two which may have been shadows. He picked on one, stared to the side of it so that his night vision could find the greatest effect. At first he could see only an insubstantial mass, hardly causing a ripple as it hung on the water like a boil. Then, he saw it. The image resolved itself in his mind, and the shape of what it was made him stumble back and fall onto his rump. The breath whooshed from his lungs.

It was a body, legs limp, arms flung to either side. The hair was a caked mass, the face hidden below the water, uneager to show itself. As Philip made the terrible identification — and now he could see that the other shapes were bodies too — a series of ripples corrugated the water away from the corpse.

As if it was moving.

Philip ran, the voices chasing him at first. This time those which had sounded kind were angry, and those which had sounded angry were furious. He shouted in fear and rage, the sudden noise exploding around the quarry and echoing back at him. He hit the base of the path and fell, striking his head on the rough ground. The night, which had felt welcoming at first, now seemed murderous, the receding voices in his head wavering in time to the lapping water at the pool's edge.

He started scrambling up the path on his hands and knees. Terror drove the pain to a store at the back of his mind, ready to be released in full later. He felt the wetness on his hands, dew and blood, and the snot running from his nose as the effort and adrenalin forced his lungs to greater exertion.

The sounds had vanished now, both voices and water, but the silence was pregnant with terror unborn, and Philip's rambling scared him.

Somehow he reached the lip of the quarry and rolled over and over in the heather, until he became entangled in the loose barbed wire of the fence. The pain of the metal cutting into his shoulder stung him for a moment, and he paused long enough to catch a breath.

Silence. Not a sound played to the stars and partial moon which appeared between the clouds. It was so quiet he could hear the heather crackle as he breathed.

Having left the quarry, Philip's fear seemed to have lessened. He stood and laughed at his ridiculous flight from the pool. His hands and knees were hurting, and blood dripped from his chin, but he was away. Forgetting the bike, he set off across the moors, arriving home just after dawn.

He could not sleep. The pain of his cuts and bruises was a dull throb, but he felt that there were other reasons for his insomnia. The main one being his sense of loss.

The voices had communicated nothing in words, he was sure. But whatever he had left at the quarry that night, he still mourned what the voices intimated at: peace, eternity, paradise. Acceptance. He had felt so at ease when the whispers drew him to them that even now the thought of them made him want to will them back into being. He wanted to hear them calling, to feel them wanting him. But they were at the quarry, not here.

Maybe later...

"Phil! Kate's here!" The voice of his mother fought its way into his room.

"Okay. Be down now!" He began to panic. Now what to do? His clothes were torn and tattered, blood sprinkled liberally over most of them. His hands and legs were black and blue, his nose still seeping blood. And Kate was here!

Before he could think of what to do, the door burst open and Kate bounded into the room. The smile on her face dropped comically at the sight of him. "Morning, lazy... Oh God, what the hell..?"

"Shhh!" Philip hissed. He hobbled to the door and slammed it behind her. "Don't want Mum to know."

Kate stared at him open mouthed, apparently unable to say anything constructive. Then her eyes paled with anger, lips thinned, nostrils flared. "You went back to the quarry."

It was Philip's turn to be surprised. "How d'you know?"

"I knew something got you about the place yesterday. You hardly spoke to me after we left. Preoccupied."

"Sorry." He turned away, not wanting to talk about it. Not with Kate. Not with anyone.

"Did you fall?"

"Fall? Yeah. Tried to get down the path, fell a few feet, came back up. Bloody hurt!" Philip sat next to Kate on the bed.

She knew he was lying, knew there was more. But she also knew what a stubborn bastard he could be, so she was reluctant to pursue it. Not yet, anyway. Perhaps later. "People have drowned there, you know."

Philip spun around, stared at her. "What?"

"Drowned. At least three, I think, since 1968. My parents never let me go there when I was younger."

"Drowned..."

"Look, Phil. I'm due at the shop at midday. I'll pick you up at five-thirty? We'll talk about whatever's up then, if you want. I'm worried, so I hope you do. Will you?"

Philip knew the answer straight away, knew what was going to happen. But he nodded and forced a smile which he hoped she would accept.

She did not. As she left, Kate resolved to take the afternoon off and come straight back. There was something wrong with Phil, and she could not simply sit back and watch him hurt himself again.

An hour later, Kate returned to Philip's house. His mother answered the door.

"Hello, Kate. Thought you were with Phil. He left thirty minutes ago with the car, said he was going to see you."

Kate forced a polite "Thanks," then pelted to her car. She aimed the bonnet at the moor and stood on the pedal.

Philip's mother watched with a smile. "Young love."

The voices were there again, forgiving and welcoming.

Philip almost flew down the path, scanning the water for any sign of the bodies. There was none. The surface of the pool was as calm and black as polished marble.

Ripples spread from the edge of the pool as Philip stepped in and splashed his way towards the middle, his breath sharp with the shock of the cold. The voices encouraged him, lured him on, promising him everything, and he pursued them, a smile on his face. He plunged suddenly, stepping off an underwater ledge into the pit. His sodden clothes began pulling him into the depths. The voices calmed him, persuaded him to let go, but his animal instinct was still prevalent. He splashed his arms and legs and pulled himself to the surface. His voice screamed for help even as his mind yearned for the dark depths below. He heard his name being called desperately, from far away, but the other voices cut out the sound, made him disregard it, until he felt himself sinking. The black below him was dotted with several pale smudges, hands that reached for him and faces that grinned at him, and spoke the voices of eternity.

Kate saw Philip go under for the last time, and she shouted his name. From her vantage point at the quarry edge she had seen his final struggle. She had been stunned silent by his scream for help and his serene, happy face.

For a moment after he disappeared, she thought she saw other shapes on the water, spreadeagled bodies floating limply in the warm sun, riding on the ripples of Philip's death. But they were only shadows.

Tim Lebbon *is a promising new young writer whose stories are being published in several small press magazines such as Peeping Tom, Psychotrope, & Black Tears.*

A Siren's Kiss

WAYNE EDWARDS

"Are you afraid to die?"
"I don't want to."
"Yeah, but are you *afraid* to?"

The fire end of a cigarette glowed orange. A river rat crossed Port Street near the two quietly speaking forms. The rat paused for a moment to study them, as if anxious to hear the question's answer. Before it came, the rodent lost interest and moved on, seeking shelter, driven by the possibility of food.

A cloud of steam and smoke came from Steve's mouth, some of it catching on his mustache and reverting to its liquid state. He closed his eyes when he spoke:

"Yes."

Lenny inhaled deeply through his mouth, tasting Steve's sweet smoke, longing for more. "Me too," he said, just to be agreeable, but in truth he wasn't. His fears were more of the every-day variety: being short when he needed to fix, the cold alone of the night, strangers. He was afraid in a way of what he was about to do. Everyone fears change, he reasoned.

Steve was looking at the empty winter beach when Lenny touched him, so he didn't see his expression. In fact, he didn't even sense the contact.

I wonder if he's known all along it would come to this?

Steve was his only friend, his only *real* one. They had started hanging out together almost a year ago, companions out of dire necessity. Both had been only a day or two from starving at the time. Like now, it had been winter, and scroungings were slim at best. Their pasts, their histories, made no difference. They had both been abandoned by one thing or another, and this was the basis for their camaraderie.

They committed the first murder together, a coming of age, a collective wasting of virginity. They'd left the bulk of the derelict's body for the rats, too excited by their actions to think beyond the cessation of their immediate pains. It had been easy, too easy. They could do it again.

The partnership seemed perfect. The nights were never quiet in the city, so an extra scream from the presumed crazy street folk was ignored as a matter of course by anybody who might hear it. The people they killed, the newly dead, were missed for a time, perhaps, by their friends, who were themselves a part of the countless millions clinging to the dragging hem of society. But no significant objection was raised; there was nothing to be said. Men, for all of history, had preyed on other men. This was understood, if not by sociologists, certainly by the dwellers of the rancid Gulf beach the killers had no choice but to call their home.

Lenny squeezed Steve's arm.

Steve continued to smoke.

They had gotten along reasonably well by killing and robbing their pathe-

tic brethren, sometimes more than once a week, depending on the weather. Lenny's habit had stabilized to a small wake-up and a sleepy-time, so his need was easily fulfilled. It helped that they usually murdered junkies: the blood frequently contained enough residue to smooth Lenny's rough edges. Steve's belly never ached with the hot emptiness, he never longed for the spiral solution to confusion and pain. It was a complete accident that he had avoided heroin addiction, a long shot. The world is a curious place.

Lenny leaned closer. He tried to breathe shallowly, but his excitement was betrayed in short, rapid huffs of breath. Had Steve not been so distracted by what had happened earlier in the evening, he would have known to be afraid. He was the weaker of the two.

There was no turning back. He would do it tonight for certain. It was only a matter of time, measured in minutes.

I could kiss you now. Before you could turn away, I could kiss you.

But he didn't. Instead he loosened his grip.

Not just yet.

Now Steve turned to face him, then looked at his arm. It carried Lenny's mark, a red-rimmed pale impression. Steve didn't *think* he'd squeezed his own arm, but no one else was around. Except Lenny. And Lenny had never touched him before. Never. That would be a violation of the only thing they could really call their own. Lenny would never do such a thing.

They smelled burning human flesh.

The scent was organic and heavy, like before when Steve had made the fatal mistake of licking his lips, thus sealing the flavor there forever, the taste of death branded sorely on his tongue.

His mouth watered instantly, then filled with vomit. A man always on the edge of starvation never threw up. It wasn't practical. Before he swallowed, he swished the globby semi-fluid around, actually telling himself to be thankful for the covering it gave his tongue, the misdirection of his taste buds. He thought he wanted to deny the flavor of flesh, but he was wrong.

He spread his fingers to drop the burning filter, but it was stuck. He carefully peeled it away, then let it fall. He watched his fingers smoke, studied his blackened skin, fascinated. Remembering –

–the curling ribbons, like circular children's slides–

–two heaps, wet but still burning–

–small but fierce flames, nibbling unevenly–

It was Steve who spoke: "You all right, man?"

Lenny had been watching, too. "Why?" he asked.

"Why what?" he returned, but Steve knew what question was being asked, and he also knew the answer. Instead of saying so, he studied his burned fingers, pretending, not very well, that pain occupied his thoughts.

He put his fingers in his mouth, still remembering, still *living* the taste of smoldering meat. Even though he was instinctively repulsed, he wanted more. He began to chew delicately, as if he was eating expensive imported candies. Tiny flakes broke away, now and then. He tried to dissolve them on his initiated tongue.

He thought of Lenny, Lenny thought of him.

The woman and the girl were no different than any of the others. At least not very different; perhaps a tad cleaner. Mother and daughter? It was impossible to say, not important enough to worry about. They'd been taken with minimal struggle, as were most of those killed. Their bodies were opened. Steve took mostly meat, Lenny mostly blood. Of their personals, there was no money, drugs, or liquor. The only things worth

appropriating were one tattered glove with three missing fingers and a chipped pair of sunglasses. Lenny took the glove, Steve the sunglasses. The faces of the dead showed no sign of surprise, used, as they were in life, to violence and robbery. The bodies' postures were humble, unobtrusive. Giving.

They should leave now, Steve had thought at the time. They were done with their business, there was nothing more to take. He couldn't understand what Lenny was doing, why he sprinkled whiskey on the corpses. Alcohol was a dear commodity, and this was surely a waste of it. He'd had no idea what was about to happen.

Steve sucked his fingers, the memory of fire almost a tangible thing. He was in the world of a few hours before, the time of change,the time of ends. He didn't notice Lenny creeping closer to him.

The flames had started small and had not grown. They crawled over the fresh kill, smoking luxuriously, shrinking it very slowly. Steve had watched, had been unable to turn away, had—

—licked his lips.

Lenny had warmed his hands, admiring his work as a thing in and of itself, and also as a bulb in the pattern of their lives, verifying the symbolic power of inertia, the logical progression of their campaign to stay alive.

And now he touched Steve, not with his fingers as before, but with his body. He adopted the same position as his friend, careful to make as much contact as possible. His head lay against Steve's. He whispered in his ear, "They is he."

Steve couldn't breathe. He imagined that he was burning, that the flames thieved his oxygen, leaving him to rasp. But he didn't smell that sweet, alluring odor, he didn't see the smoke. He realized his mouth was full of sand, that his eyes were covered by it. He was naked.

"They is he," Lenny said again, kissing his neck. "We is I."

Steve could hear the Gulf waves and knew what they looked like. A winter beach at night, desolate and unforgiving. Gray.

He was on his stomach. Parts of Lenny were inside him: Lenny's fingers beneath the skin of his breasts, Lenny's teeth at the joint of his neck and shoulder. Lenny's tongue sought sinew, as did his penis.

Steve's bones were bending, even though he didn't resist. He knew soon they would begin to break, one by one, in a succession of muffled snaps. The pain was there, but it wasn't all-consuming. He didn't wonder why; as before when he'd been asked, the answer was all too plain, did not truly beg reply. There was only one thing that mattered now, that made any real difference to the world: one killer would die.

Still he sought fire but couldn't find it, the fire that burns human flesh. He finally realized how much he had always longed for it, and why he had only been allowed a taste. He was no longer afraid to die.

Wayne Edwards *is the editor of Palace Corbie, an annual anthology of horror stories, and is also the editor and publisher of Merrimack Books. He lives in Nebraska and is currently working on a second novel collaboration with John Marshall.*

SOME DAYS • AC EVANS

Some days I just don't
want to see other people's faces

Rain. Inadequate sky.
Perhaps pavements gleam reflected

Return. But how
you clung quivering. Not goodbye

Half-empty train. You wouldn't wave
Half-empty lives. But fleeting
contacts and separate separations.

BEYOND THE WINDOW

by

PETER CROWTHER

***Pete Crowther** has contributed stories and articles to numerous anthologies and magazines, and is the editor of the Narrow Houses series for Little, Brown. In collaboration with James Lovegrove, he has recently completed Escardy Gap, a dark fantasy, and he is currently working on his debut solo novel, April Fool. He is married with two sons and lives in Harrogate.*

He came back to her one last time,
disguised as the night
and the wind
and the rain.
His hair was time,
his breath dust
and his eyes the stars in the sky.
He watched her working.
Heard her voice sound again
as she moved through the familiarity of the house,
touching things...
thinking thoughts...
making plans.
Outside the window,
at one with the elements,
he watched.
She seemed so close.
He reached out,
through the wind and the window,
into the soft warmth inside.
Into her body.
He whispered to her then,
as only the dead can whisper,
soundlessly,
and the deep resonance of his voice
was the soul of the night.
He saw her shudder,
lift a hand to her breast
and glance quickly at the world
beyond the window.
For the briefest slice of time
they were one again.
Together.
And then the moment passed
and she brushed away a tear before it fell.
He left.
She turned away to carry on while,
outside,
the rain came down,
alone again,
beyond the window.

the Guinea Worm

JULIE TRAVIS

1 Kodacolour Gold 400 ASA 35mm film. 24 exposure. *Shot #1:* full frontal view of naked, white male. Heavy build, age approx mid 30's, receding dark hair. Standing in an empty room with panelled walls. Painting of some sort behind the man. Light: gloomy. Man is staring intently ahead, a few degrees away from the camera. *Shot #2:* same man in same part of the room. Hands are held up to his face, which has split from the middle of the forehead to the chin. Man's eyes are open wide in look of horror. Huge bruises cover the rest of his body. *Shot #3:* man's face stands open like the flaps of a box. Inside is another face, mouth open in a furious scream. The eyes are wide open, this time in anger, focused entirely on the camera. The bruises have become running sores. The man's arms are waving wildly and are blurred. The hands appear to have become talons. *Shot #4:* same room and position. Subjects: a young woman holding a child. Light: too bright, presumably a sudden burst of sunshine. Part of woman's head and left hand side is bleached out. The woman is wearing a long white dress and no make up, the child naked. Shot resembles Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus. *Shot #5:* as if in parody of shot #4, the woman and child stand as before, with the woman's dress ripped open to reveal huge breasts and erect nipples. The woman's mouth is slightly open, tongue lolling over bright red lips. One hand is holding the baby tight around the neck. The baby's mouth is open impossibly wide, showing jagged teeth. Six fur covered snouts have appeared from its body, all are open and snarling, lips pulled back to the gums. *Shot #6:* same room and position. Room is empty except for single massive sunflower lying on floorboards. Top half is propped up facing the camera. Parts of the stalk are brown and rotting. The flower head is decayed, many of the petals have dropped off. *Shot #7-24:* blank, presumably unexposed.

2 Sue lit a cigarette, leant back in her chair and dropped the photographs on the table. She wondered what to do with them. They weren't her photographs, had only come into her possession by chance; she'd spotted a used reel of film two mornings ago whilst walking on the other side of town, just lying there on the pavement. She'd had half a mind to leave it where it was – the owner might retrace their steps and find it – but it had looked like rain, and Sue didn't know what a downpour would do to the film. It had been a good enough excuse to put the reel in her bag.

Later her curiosity got the better of her and she'd had the film developed. She had expected a rather boring collection of slightly out of focus holiday snaps, or a toddler's birthday party, or an adult's birthday party; twenty four combinations of bleached out, drunken faces with red eyes from the flash. To get home and find this strange collection had been shocking, like getting a

glimpse of another world. They had a nightmarish quality. For some reason, Sue found the final shot the most disturbing. The sunflower had a perverse, almost sexual feel to it. It stirred distant memories, perhaps of a dream she'd had as a child, of trying to get home through streets filled with sunflowers, moving against her body, winding themselves around her.

The others, however, were quite awful enough. Perhaps they were stills from a horror film, or showed a collection from some sort of art portfolio. Or were simply a strange form of pornography. Whatever, the make-up was incredibly well done. And the room was beautiful; the dark oak panels, the varnished floorboards, the sombre lighting. All gave the room an air of quiet conservatism; the room could be a managing director's office. But the light was too gloomy to be anything other than an old house. There was a hint of sadness too, as if the room had long since seen happier times. The painting, quite clear in one of the shots, added its own oppressive air, depicting a wounded figure being lifted down from a crucifix. Sue shuffled through the photographs again, admiring them and repulsed at the same time. She lit another cigarette and carried on wondering what to do.

Eventually, she did nothing. The photographs she gathered together and placed in a drawer, already full of the junk everyone accumulates over the years: broken trinkets given by a long dead grandparent, letters from an ex-lover... Stuff people look at on lonely, rainy Sunday afternoons. Sue put the photographs there, knowing they were out of place, but not wanting to throw them away. She would deal with them at some point, although it occurred to her that the person responsible for them might not be the sort she would want to get into contact with. Surely, whoever thought them up was sick.

3 Picture a room awash with blood and shit. A room empty of furniture except for a mediaeval painting on one wall, its bare floorboards broken up only by a thick wooden pillar in the centre. A single, bare lightbulb is on and throws harsh orange light over everything; the drenched oak panelling, the glistening floorboards, the door-handle smeared with the bloody fingerprints of a participant, and eventual victim of the slaughter, who in his terror forgot how to open a door. The room is unbearably hot. On the window, condensation mixes with dark arterial blood. The room is completely silent except for the occasional creaking of old wooden joints, as if it is taking on more of an already unbearable burden.

The room holds an atmosphere charged with shock; a man's memories of the horrific last minutes of his life hang in the air. Stripped naked, hoisted up by his ankles, splattered with the blood of the youth he helped batter to death, he knows what is coming. His accomplice, soon to be his murderer, is uncontrollable; the murder of the youth has been a revelation to him, he is born again and sets to his task in near religious fervour. After literally tearing the youth's corpse apart, he has turned his attention to his partner. Now hanging upside down, he feels his own shit pouring down his back and running into his hair as he pleads for his life. A second later blood is hosing from his body, spraying the walls and the suit of the heavy set man with the receding hairline who is killing him. The man enters the next world screaming through a tunnel of pain that opens up and becomes his entire universe.

As the man dies Sue awakes from a dream she thought she had left behind with her childhood, of walking through a street filled with sunflowers, all so tall she can barely see where she is going. And they are moving, their heads

bobbing against her, their leaves embracing her, pulling her down amongst them. The sunflowers break her fall, winding themselves around her body. As she looks up, she sees a circle of sunflower heads bobbing up and down, lowering themselves onto her.

4 "Richard Archer stood impassively in the dock as the judge passed the death sentence. He was told that he'd committed 'appalling crimes' with no motive except the pleasure he apparently found in the act itself. Archer is considered to be so dangerous a life sentence would not be enough to protect the public. This will be the third execution since the reintroduction of capital punishment at the end of last year. Many questions in this case remain unanswered, the most important one being how can a family man, loved and respected by all who knew him, change almost overnight into an uncontrollable psychopath?"

5 Sue felt a sense of déjà vu, sitting in front of the television with the strange collection of photographs on her lap once more. She had taken them out of the drawer and looked through them countless times in the last few months, sometimes after the nightmares that frequently disturbed her sleep and often in the quiet times during the evenings. She found she was almost permanently unsettled. With the dreams had come memories, so faint at first they were no more than vague feelings. She felt she was missing something, something important, about herself. At times she almost remembered what it was. Her home had become a shrine to her dreams and memories; the wooden sunflowers propped in a corner of her bedroom, the floor littered with photographs from old family albums, each picture carefully torn so that all family members were separate from each other. Sue did not notice the strangeness of these things. She was aware only of something inside her changing. The details were unimportant.

She had studied the photographs obsessively, noticing another little detail each time. This time she saw that something about them was familiar, but at the same time odd. Her eyes settled on the painting. She knew it, but it looked wrong somehow.

It was a Rubens, she eventually decided. But it was definitely wrong. She had a few prints of his most famous work, in a book on religious art. Flicking through it, she came to it: *The Descent from the Cross.* She saw immediately what was wrong. The image was reversed. No mystery at all then, she thought, a little disappointed, just a mistake by the developers. The negatives must have been put in the enlarger back to front.

She looked up from the photographs when she heard the newsflash, of a man being sentenced to death for murder. She was aware of the story, but had not been following it closely. She was suddenly overwhelmed with information... *photographs of two murdered men... news footage of policemen guarding a house, stepping politely aside to let men carrying two bulky bodybags past... confused film of a man being bundled into a police van, surrounded by photographers jostling for a shot, who glares briefly out of a window as the vehicle pulls away...*

At the sight of him, Sue's stomach lurched. She knew that man. She was holding his photograph in her hand.

6 The woman took the painting off the wall, stared at it thoughtfully for a while before replacing it. She would be leaving soon, but not yet. There was always a certain sadness in leaving — happy memories countered by apprehension that the next place would disappoint. And this house

had seen so many good times. She walked to the centre of the room, stroked the mirror that lay against the pillar. It shimmered slightly at her touch. Her reflection flicked in and out of view, giving her only fleeting glimpses of herself: strikingly tall, immaculately dressed, her long black hair flecked with grey. An imposing figure. She looked fit to receive a visitor. And there would be one more before she left. Her reflection faded again, then disappeared, like a loose connection finally failing. She walked to the far corner of the room, steps echoing across the floorboards, sat, in a beautiful but intensely uncomfortable high backed chair, and waited.

7 Sue arrived at the prison grounds a little before eight and joined the crowd. She had not been to an execution before, did not want to be at this one but felt compelled, as if seeing Archer die would answer her questions. Were the murders connected to the photographs? What about the woman and child—where were they? And, of course, the sunflower... it was as if someone had captured her dreams on film.

The execution was worse than Sue had thought possible. It was dull and cold, the early morning sun struggling to pierce the clouds. As a distant church chimed the hour a man, head covered with a cloth sack, hands tied behind his back, appeared, circled by prison guards. He was led to the scaffold, up its short staircase and guided to the gallows. In one fluid movement the executioner strapped the man's ankles together, placed the noose around his neck, adjusted it slightly, stepped back and pulled a lever. The man dropped, but dropped short, only a couple of feet, and the watching crowd shrank back as the masked man struggled against the noose. With one huge effort he tore his hands free. Sue was nearly knocked over by a sudden rush of people, terrified that Archer might be escaping. But there was no plan, no method to his actions. She stood and watched his final moments, his arms waving wildly, so fast they became blurred, the fingers together, clawing the air like talons. The face mask bulged and tore and Sue saw again the expression of rage on the small face within a face, glaring and blinking blood from its eyes. Then a policeman ran up to the writhing prisoner and shot him repeatedly in the head until there was nothing left but a pulverised mess.

8 The house was quiet. It had not been hard to find—as soon as the shock of the execution was over, Sue had returned to where she found the film. Near the top of the street was the house. Sue recognised it from the news footage. There were still lengths of blue and white tape used by the police visible, trodden into the mud and hanging off the hedge. Looking through the front window, she could see into a living room, its sparse furniture covered with dust sheets. It was not the room in the photographs.

The front door was unlocked. Sue reminded herself that she had just seen Richard Archer die—of that there was no doubt—before going inside. The door to the front room was open. Sue took a quick look inside before moving down the hall. A thick layer of dust covered everything. She stopped outside the back reception room. Light reflected dully off varnished floorboards and dark oak panelling. This was the room.

As she stepped inside, she saw movement; a figure walking toward her. It stopped short when she did. To her relief she realised she was standing in front of a mirror, propped against a huge wooden pillar that ran through the centre of the room. It was unlike anywhere Sue had been before. Parts of the

room were familiar, but the photographs were flat and two dimensional. This room was alive, tense, expectant.

"Close the door, won't you," said a soft voice.

Sue took a step back in shock. There was someone else in the room after all. In the far corner stood a woman. She walked to the window and Sue saw her as the light fell on her. How old was she? Sue couldn't tell. Was she involved with Archer? The woman was tall, looked relaxed and confident. In control. Sue was frightened and intrigued by her at the same time.

The woman had asked her to shut the door, was waiting for her to do it. So she did. Her eyes briefly registered on the painting. The woman noticed.

"It's a fake, of course. But a good one, don't you think? I'm very attached to it. It goes where I go."

So she was involved. With the photography, with Archer. Sue pulled the photographs from her pocket. "I found these," she said. She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"You were supposed to," said the woman. "I didn't intend for them to be taken, but a budding journalist thought he had the scoop of the century and insisted... you probably saw what was left of him on the news last night," she added casually.

"What's in these pictures?" asked Sue. "One of them looks like something I used to dream about."

"And have started to dream about again." The woman was suddenly staring intently into Sue's eyes. She walked up to her, around her, and stood, right behind her. Sue stood her ground.

"The photographs are reflections from the mirror." The woman breathed the words into Sue's ear.

So that's why the painting was back to front, thought Sue. "What did you do to that child?" she asked.

The woman had come to the house on a burning summer's day, wreathed in smiles, cooing gently to her baby. She was different from the usual visitor, for whom this place was a last resort; faces would display at best distinct unease, or often outright torture. But when they faced themselves, when the mirror took the facade of skin and bone and muscle and reshaped them according to the sadness, the pain and the misery inside them there would be relief among their emotions. With the mother and child, it was different. She had walked in, confident that the mirror would reflect her own image of the baby-angelic, a gift from God who could do no wrong. She was oblivious of her own reflection of overt sexuality; the horrific transformation of her baby into a monster threw her first into complete despair and then rage. The baby's stomach bulged and heaved and then the animal snouts appeared, pushing their way into the world, new born, wet and snarling. At the same time, the mirror showed the child's mouth split wide open in a manic grin, opening wider and wider to reveal a mouthful of fangs. She had shaken the baby, as if attempting to snap it out of its condition, before running from the house, one hand still tight around the baby's neck.

Sue turned and faced the woman. "Why show them their bad sides? Why not show them the good? Everyone has good in them."

The woman raised her eyebrows mockingly. "Ah, but do you know what good is? In humans it is a flaw, a weakness. It is not your natural state. Faced with a choice of good or evil, evil will always win. It is your most natural condition, your strength, so much more attractive to you."

The heat of the room made Archer sweat in his suit. The young man hung upside down before him, consciousness returning, waking to feel the rope pulling

and cutting into his ankles, his arms hanging uselessly below his head, hair hanging lank below that. Archer tightened his grip on the heavy iron spike in his hand. The young man's eyes were wide open now and as Archer took a step forward he started screaming, begging for mercy, for life. Archer raised his hand and thrust the spike into the man's stomach, twisting and turning it before pulling it out. The man flopped uselessly on the rope. Shit began to run down his back. Archer stuck the spike into the man's thigh, withdrew it quickly this time to see if he'd hit the artery. When he found he'd missed he began frantically puncturing the body. Finally he found the man's jugular vein, felt hot blood soak into his clothes as he tore out the spike and bent, gasping for breath, to watch the man's eyes as he died.

"Richard Archer would never have killed those people if it wasn't for you."

"Perhaps not those people, and not at that time. But he would have killed someone, eventually. How people deal with the truth is not my concern. I provide a service. Archer found he liked what he saw. Many do. Others spend the rest of their lives trying to run from what they are. And for those that can't, there's always *suicide*."

She whispered the word seductively and laid a hand on Sue's shoulder. Sue shuddered. So much was unclear, but at the same time she believed the woman utterly. She had seen too much not to. The woman caressed Sue's shoulder then bent slowly forward and kissed her on the lips.

The sensation was so intense, the act so unexpected, Sue felt a momentary dizziness. The woman caught her as she stumbled, and held her.

"You see," she murmured, "I'm not all bad. And you didn't know you'd enjoy that. You're learning new things about yourself all the time. Look in the mirror and you'll learn some more."

Sue broke away. "No. I know myself. I know what I am."

"So why did you come here? I know, what's important is, do you? How are you sleeping?"

The woman walked back to the window, was silhouetted against the light outside. "It was that one last photograph, wasn't it? It wasn't Archer, or the woman, or the child, or the people Archer murdered. You care about them no more than I do. It was that one photograph of the sunflower. You really thought you'd forgotten about it hadn't you? And you nearly had—as you can see, I was packing. I'd nearly given up on you."

Sue deliberately turned her gaze from the mirror. "Something happened to me when I was young. I don't remember what it was, but if I look I'll find out what it's made me. If you know what I am, why don't you just tell me?"

She thinks she remembers being nine years old, asleep in bed. Her mind is aware that someone has entered the room and is sitting on the bed, though she cannot wake. She feels a hand pressed to her forehead as if checking her temperature. She feels the hand travelling down her body and the kiss upon her lips. She is so frightened her mind forces her away, back into sleep.

"Oh no, my dear, that wouldn't do at all. That would be too easy. And you might not believe me. If you want to know—and I think you do want to know, very badly—you have to look and see for yourself. I'm not going to do it for you."

"It will change me though, won't it? I saw Archer on the gallows. He changed, physically I mean. I don't want that to happen to me."

"You mean you don't want people to know what you really are. Never mind—honesty is another flaw. Archer was different. He was himself – totally – at the end. He was also swinging from a noose. Do you think you're likely to be

doing that? But the fact that you're here means you're changing anyway; the woman you were even a month ago could never have come here. The Susan Curtis you've been for twenty-six years is ceasing to exist."

Sue sat until late in the day, thinking, deciding, all the while knowing the decision was already made. When she broke down, sobbing uncontrollably for a time, the woman held her. When Sue dozed she awoke to find the woman studying the painting with an air of complete unconcern. As the afternoon wore away and the sun began to drop, Sue knew it was time. She got up, tidied her hair and clothes, and walked over to the mirror. It was huge, square, like something you'd find in the hall of a stately home. It was surrounded by an elaborate gold frame with tiny cherubs carved into each corner. Sue could see the reflection of the painting. The image was familiar, perhaps more so now than the real thing. She drew herself up to her full height and looked as her reflection began to change.

Julie Travis *is 27 and has recently moved across London, from near Kensal Green cemetery to near Abney Park cemetery. She has had stories published in Night Mail, Totally Wired and issues two and three of REM. Discussions are currently underway for a film version of The Guinea Worm.*

A.C. Evans *(see the poem Some Days on page 32) is a graphic artist and writer born in 1949 and currently living in London. His poetic texts and graphic images explore a zone of evocation where fantasy and reality converge. Chimera Obscura, his latest collection, is £3.50 ($7) from Phlebas Press, 2 The Stables, High Park, Oxenholme, Cumbria LA9 7RE.*

THE TIES THAT BLIND

MIKE O'DRISCOLL

Despite what you may have heard, this is no longer a true story. As far as the good citizens of Burrovage are concerned, when the morning comes, their litany of awful dreams will remain where they have always been: in the mind. As for the bad ones, there were ties that bound them so tightly to me that they no longer saw the awful thing they did so long ago. I came home to remind them.

Old fat Caution Giltrap was eating hash browns and eggs the morning Deputy Jimson drove up and told him what I had done. I imagined the blood draining from his face while he listened to Jimson, jowls sagging as he pushed away his meal. I wondered if his heart began to beat a little faster, or if his stomach began to churn.

Tell me Caution, when Jimson drove off and left you more alone than you'd ever been, did you gaze out the window towards the gnarled rock of Waklaugh Mountain and hope to find some answer there? Or some escape? Did you get up and haul your braces over your fat stomach and shoulders and go out to taste the bitter day? Or did you accept what you already knew in one deep, dark part of your mind? Did you accept that I was coming for you?

All your life you've lived in the house your grandfather built over ninety years ago. His son had added to the house—an extra bedroom, the porch and an inside john—whenever he had had money to spare. "With three sons," he'd tell his friends, "you gotta have plenty space to let 'em grow." Remember Slim and Ransom, your two brothers who went to fight the communists in Korea? Remember how they went and never came back? The house came to you then, the youngest. You didn't add any more rooms. There had already been too many for the one boy you and Colette had had. And that boy and his mother haven't lived in this house for nearly twelve years.

Think about it, Caution, think about it as you sit there in your cane chair sucking solace from your cigar. Think about how I painted the walls of Sway Giltrap's home with his blood, and that of his wife and kids.

I'm getting closer to Burrovage every day.

There's a room where the dust motes dance in the shafts of sunlight that stream through a gap in the curtains. I've seen the maid open wide those curtains, letting the greater light swallow motes and shafts as it engulfed the room with the promise of a fine day.

And I've seen you, Dove DaLinia, propped up in bed as your maid brought the breakfast tray and placed it on your lap. I watched you pour iced tea into a china cup and nibble on a piece of crisp toast as you skimmed through the pages of the *Burrovage Journal*, a weekly rag of local gossip for which your activities had provided many a column inch since your husband's death eight years ago.

You were beautiful then, when you met and married Louis DaLinia and his money. His older sister, Evelyne, a spinster, had been against the marriage from the start, but you'd loved each other madly, and as you told Evelyne, love was blind. You were twenty-two then, and now, at thirty-eight, your beauty is deserting you; your eyes haul round heavy bags and livid veins stand out on your head and throat; and corrosion greys more of your golden hair with each passing day. But worst of all, Dove, you seem to have lost the exquisite style and good taste you once displayed, to the extent that the word 'dowdy' has recently crept into the vocabulary of those reporters who still bother to comment on your social and charitable activities for the *Burrovage Journal*'s society pages. There are even those malicious gossips who credit your former good taste and style to your poor dead husband and say that you've reverted to the tramp you always were, a Pygmalionish parallel that horrifies you.

Turn the page, my dear, and see that article tucked away in the bottom corner. An unnamed family of three—husband, wife and daughter—murdered in their beds two nights ago, in a town called Amstel, seventy miles north of Burrovage. How awful, is that what you're thinking? Read on, then. See how the police are saying that the circumstances of the killings were very similar to a multiple murder in Dorson, a month back. Does something about the Dorson tragedy ring a bell in your mind? Fill you with unease? I understand Dove, how hard it is to put your finger on what exactly the connection is, but that's what happens when the mind starts to slip. What's that? Never mind? It'll come to you in it's own good time?

Damn right, Dove.

I saw you climb out of bed and shiver. I watched as you went to the dressing table and commenced the ritual of rehabilitating the dead flesh beneath your eyes.

From the hills that surround the town I watched Wallicent Cadré arrive at his Realtors office on Main Street. Poor Wallicent, I can almost believe something like pity stirred in your heart. Almost. People said I was a sullen child, withdrawn and buried in my books, but you never did. You used to smile with your perfect teeth and offer me rides to school in your station wagon. I never accepted though; I saw the same thing in your eyes that burned inside my father.

April Corolla was busy on the phone when you went inside. She still refuses your advances and you would love to get rid of her but she has things on you that hold you back. You passed on through into your office and eased yourself into a leather upholstered chair.

You're a self made man of forty-nine, average height and average build, slightly greying, slightly thinning on top. You wear good quality, off the peg suits chosen by your wife, and still drive a big station wagon that you think reflects your status in the town, as a practical man. Business is, as they say, taking care of itself, and all you needed in life was some excuse to extricate yourself from the affair you've become embroiled in with Giddy Lorna, the wife of a former client. That was until a month ago, when Caution Giltrap told you what had happened to his son. You've handled the fear pretty well, till this morning when you saw the *Journal,* and made the connection Dove DaLinia was unable to make. Now, what you need most in life, is Caution Giltrap's reassurance that this was a situation that could be handled, dealt with, made to go away.

So what is it that stops the return of equanimity, Wallicent? What has old Caution been saying to you?

I rode the streets of Burrovage with Deputy Mesmer Jimson in his steel blue Continental, as he searched for the courage to drive out to see Dove DaLinia. He wore a big hat and expensive shades, a smart uniform and leather cowboy boots, and, in pride of place, a .45 on his hip. He had a call this morning, from Amstel. He had to break the news. He can remember what it was like last time, with Giltrap. And now they're asking him to see if these two things are connected and he's hoping to Christ that it isn't so. Shit, Mesmer, remember when the job used to be a breeze?

You're twenty-seven now but I remember you as a kid. You weren't very bright, even then. Remember, I tried to tell you once, what was happening in my home? Your face turned bright red and you called me a whore. I hit your red face then, hard, and you said you were sorry. You were a child then, Mesmer, you've always been a child. No one tells you what's going on; you grope for clues to things you don't really want to know. I'll help you Mesmer, I'll show you who's connected and how, but when I have, you must walk away. But first, why don't you pull in here at Avery's Eats, grab yourself a burger and fries, and maybe a large Coke to go. Perhaps it'll give you the stomach to go on.

I wait in the shadows beneath the porch as he runs it down for her.

"Course your husband and his sister were well-respected in the community, Mrs DaLinia," Mesmer said.

Meaning, Dove, that you never were. Anyway, Mesmer's too young to remember what your husband or Evelyne were like. And at least you know now what sparked that memory this morning when you saw that article in the paper. Evelyne married—Mrs Evelyne Packard—and with a daughter too, the bitch. Who'd have thought it possible? And dead now too, up in Amstel. Shame.

"I want to thank you, Deputy," Dove said. "I know how hard it is to be the bearer of sad tidings."

Jimson flushed. "You sure you'll be okay now?"

"The burden of my grief is one I have to carry alone, Deputy Jimson." Hell, Dove, your resolve is admirable. "I thank you for your concern but I will not let it hinder you in your duty."

You walked him to his car and gave him an encouraging wave as he slid in and drove off. I know you think he's nothing but a slob who has risen far above his station but that's not what's bothering you. What bothers you is that you remember something else about the article in the *Journal*. It was the murders in Dorson that had rung a bell, not the Amstel killings. The murder of a man and his family, a man named Giltrap. Your husband had been friendly with a man of that name, a man who had lived here in Burrovage.

And so, on to the *Oliphant* where the last two blindmen sit talking, trying to find a way out. Wallicent Cadré has been on the phone, pleading with them to tell him what to do.

I took a seat at a table in the corner where the gloom shielded me from their eyes. It was the first time I'd ever been in that place that so enraptured my father. It reeked of him.

"What do you make of it, Lucan?" Moth Gilheaney asked, as he climbed up on to the high stool so that he wouldn't have to be looking up into his friend's face. "What'll she say to Jimson?"

It was late afternoon and Lucan Screed had dropped in for a stiff one and, I guessed, to see if he could prompt Gilheaney into recollecting the details. I doubted very much that Screed's mind was blank on the subject; he just needed to have his fears confirmed by a friendly voice.

Moth Gilheaney, a short, undernourished man, had inherited *The Rare and Blighted Oliphant* from his father thirty years ago. Everybody called it the *Oliphant,* but the sign out front still gave it the full title it had had in his father's time.

The two men sat either side of the counter.

Screed, a tall, black-haired, once grateful man, was all bone and sinew, unable to sit absolutely still for two seconds, as if an as yet unidentified nerve had been exposed in his body and had been chewed and picked on by unseen forces ever since. His knees clacked and his arms twitched as he downed his drink but Moth Gilheaney had long since grown used to the oscillatory aberrations of his friend. Lucan Screed had once been the Reverend Lucan Screed, till guilt and drink drove him from God's path.

"Dove DaLinia don't know a thing about it," Screed said finally. "Louis swore he never told her."

Ah but Lucan, haven't you ever heard of intuition?

"I still think Jimson's gonna get to us eventually," Moth Gilheaney said. "And we oughta be prepared, specially with the way Cadré's handling this."

"Jimson's too young to remember, Moth. Besides which, the man's a moron," Screed said.

Gilheaney climbed down from his stool and refilled their glasses with bourbon. "And Cadré? What's going through his mind?"

I watched as Screed twitched his arms, and as a tic animated his gaunt and bewhiskered face. And I thought, how do you justify it to yourself at night, Lucan? Do you tell yourself you allowed it to happen for the greater good? Mother told you the truth, didn't she? Came to you for help, long before I ever did. What did you tell her? To pray, and that would make him stop? It didn't work, Lucan, and so she hung herself out in the barn. I blame you for that.

"Caution will keep Wallicent to his word," Screed said.

"I wish I knew what he was thinking right now."

Screed drained his glass. "What you really want to know, Moth, is do I think Caution remembers Nettie Parrish, the kid who got out?"

Gilheaney's voice was a whisper when he spoke. "That's exactly what I mean, Lucan."

"I think," Screed said, "that there hasn't been a single day in the last twelve years, even before what happened in Dorson, that Caution Giltrap hasn't thought about the Parrish girl."

"Yeah, that's what I figured too."

Screed was right in thinking what had preyed most on your mind all this time, Caution. Perhaps there was some escape for you in dreams, but I figure since Dorson, you've probably been visited there, by the ghosts of your son, and the daughter-in-law and two grandchildren you've never seen. Ironic isn't it, Caution, you swearing the others to secrecy, but guilt forcing you to tell your wife what you did. She and the boy moved away shortly afterwards, you never saw them again. Sway wrote once, five years back, just to let you know Colette had died of a stroke. Never sent a return address, never asked you to the funeral. Just hid away till I found him.

Caution sat out on the porch in his cane chair smoking his pipe, waiting for me. He watched night slowly falling, wondering perhaps, if it would be his final one, not knowing I was saving him for last.

You're a clever man, Caution, you know that Jimson will be coming to see you again. Perhaps you pity him, having to try and make sense of something he'll never understand. Will you tell him any-

way? Will one of the others? Tell him the good name of this damn town was worth more than the lives of five children? Five children who came to you for help, only to be sent home to the man who raped them? Cadré's called you how many times today? You could smell his fear down the line, couldn't you? I want to smell your fear, Caution, it's my due, after what you did to us that night. What did you tell the others? You had to take care of it among yourselves; Rance Parrish was your responsibility, yours, Screed's, Gilheaney's, Cadré's and Louis DaLinia's? You couldn't let word of what was happening get out?

I remember, Caution, you spoke most vehemently against bringing in outside agencies — bad enough that one had to tolerate tax men, you said, commercial travellers and political canvassers, without inviting the agents of chaos into one's home. That's what you called them, those who might have done something for us. The others went along with you in the end, had been ashamed and afraid not to. And you always knew, Caution, that if Nettie Parrish came back to settle old accounts, then it would be with them all, and not you alone.

A breeze hummed through the telephone wires out by the road and I felt you shudder at what was coming. Not yet, but soon.

That night I called on Wallicent Cadré and whispered in his ear, told him there was only one way out for him. He thanked me for my consideration, and promised he would do it.

In the morning, I followed Deputy Jimson to the Burrovage Properties Realtors office where he had to try and calm an hysterical April Corolla. She screamed with Godawful terror, relentless in her need to communicate her shock. When finally he managed to get past her into Cadré's office, he found the realtor, all grey and stiff in a charcoal suit, suspended by the neck from the fluorescent light in the centre of the ceiling. There was a handwritten note on the desk. "She came to me last night, Caution," was all it said. Jimson put it in an envelope and called the County coroner's office. Three hours later, after the body had been taken to the mortuary, and after he had called on Mrs Cadré in what seemed to him an increasingly repetitious task, the Deputy joined the rest of us at the *Oliphant.*

His uniform was stained with sweat, and I saw bits of vomit on his trouser legs. Gilheaney, Screed and Giltrap sat around a table at the rear of the bar. Gilheaney poured him a drink, motioned for him to join them. I crouched on the stairs that led to the cellar, leafing through a book from Gilheaney's shelves, a writer I never heard of. I don't read much anymore, I suppose I'm out of touch. I flicked through the pages, one eye on the words, the other on the blindmen.

Jimson sat, took out the note and passed it to each of them in turn, waiting for them to tell him what it meant. When, after two minutes had passed in silence, Jimson spoke, it was to Giltrap.

"Who was he talking about, Mr Giltrap? Who came to see him?"

Old Caution glanced at the other two in turn and they nodded their silent assent. "You remember the Parrish family, Jimson?"

Mesmer sipped his drink and wiped sweat from his forehead. "No, I don't," he lied.

"A fire, Jimson," Giltrap said. "A tragedy."

Mesmer's sweat-slicked face turned pale. His voice trembled when he spoke again. "Oh sweet Jesus," he said. "Rance Parrish and his kids. They was all burned to death in their beds."

"Not everyone, Mesmer. Not everyone died," Giltrap said. He drained his glass of bourbon and Gilheaney refilled it.

"You remember anything about the Parrishes, kid?" Screed asked, his fingers twitching on the table to some manic tune. "Rumours?"

I could see Jimson physically wilting under their combined gaze. I knew how dry and raw his throat must be after all the puking he had done. I could see he wished he was somewhere else. Remember me now, Mesmer? Little Nettie Parrish who told you what her daddy did to her at night? Little Nettie Parrish and her younger sister and three young brothers, all sullen faced and brooding? What was the joke, Mesmer, the one the other kids made? The one about inbreeding?

"It was a long time ago," you said. "I thought they all died."

"Remember Nettie Parrish?" Screed said. "She woulda been your age, I guess."

"What happened to her?" Jimson asked.

So they told you because they needed you to protect them. And when they were finished, you got up and walked out to your car. I knew what was going through your mind, I saw it written on your face. Gilheaney followed you out, caught your arm, tried to make you stay, tried to bind you to them. You turned round, saw Screed and Giltrap standing in the doorway, the look on their faces telling you they knew they had failed. Perhaps you saw my face in the window, smiling my gratitude for your decision. Then you hit Gilheaney in the stomach and got in your car. I know how hard it was, Mesmer, to drive away when you felt that what you should have done was lock those three killers up, but believe me when I say, it's better that we do this my way.

They slumped back into the bar while I watched you through the window as you slid east out of town, like a forgotten dream.

I gazed at Dove DaLinia through her open window as she tossed and turned, tormented by her dead husband's dreams, dreams in which she did not figure. I know how damn unfair it is, believe me. Like life itself. Tell me what haunts your sleep, Dove. Is it the memory of a night, twelve years ago, when Louis came in late, his face pale and streaked with dirt and sweat? You followed him upstairs, didn't you, and stood outside the door, listening to him puking. You opened the door and saw him scrubbing his hands with a wire brush, scrubbing till the flesh was raw and bleeding and not stopping, and sobbing, and that haunted look on his face. Did you wonder, did you instinctively know that he'd committed some great sin? You never asked him, but from that night on, he was a different man, all broken up inside. You tried to make him better, but when he refused to give you children, you began to despise him and to seek your pleasure in other men. And it was only after you'd taken him out on the balcony that night when he was all juiced up with scotch, only after that little push which wasn't even really a push, not intentional anyway, at least it was never proved; only when you'd inherited his shares in a Texas oil well and the three million dollar annual income that came with it; only when his body was in the ground and you could look forward to starting over again; only then did some of his guilt settle on your shoulders and make you realise that to be weak was to be human.

So there never were other men after he died, even if the *Burrovage Journal* saw it differently. There was only the money, and in the absence of love, that became your obsession. And now, Mesmer has told you about the murder of Louis' sister and perhaps that was the clue you've been waiting for, the hint of some dark thing Louis did that night, coming back for you.

In the moonlight, I saw tears on your cheeks. It was the first time you've cried anything but crocodile tears since you were a young girl. They boiled out of you as you remembered the lost innocence of youth, and all the truth and beauty that you no longer had. Ah Dove, if only you knew what Louis did the night he came home with blood on his hands. But would knowing make it any easier?

I knocked gently on the door and pushed it open. It was a long ago Dove DaLinia who waited for me, sitting up in bed with the sheet clutched round her neck like a frightened child. I danced across the room, cutting a swathe through the magical light, wanting her to see my beauty, wanting her to have that one last vision of something she might have been.

I would like to say she was brave at the end, that she welcomed me with open arms when she saw my blade cut arcs through the night. But it wasn't like that, wasn't like that at all.

Summer rain was falling when I joined them for the final session. They sat in a darkened corner, each too preoccupied with his own guilty thoughts, his own weak excuses, to notice me at an empty table. Their voices were low and mean as they argued and tried to snap the ties that bound them together.

"What else could we have done?" Moth Gilheaney croaked.

"Nothing," Screed said, angrily. "And you know it."

"We could have took the kids," Gilheaney went on. "We could've took 'em into our own homes."

"You think Rance Parrish woulda stood for that?" Screed raged. "And how would we have explained it to everybody else?"

I wondered when Caution would speak, or if he would speak at all. I could hardly make out his face in the gloom. He alone accepted the inevitable.

"We could've sent them away from Burrovage," Gilheaney went on, trying to imagine what it would've been like if he'd had the guts to do what was right. "Sent them up to the city. They have places, homes where they woulda been safe."

"No," Screed said, his temper flagging. "Like Caution said, it was a local thing. It was up to us to deal with it. If we'd have sent them away, people would have come asking questions – not just social workers, but newspapers and television – what would you have said to them? That we allow some of our citizens to rape and brutalise their kids? This is a small town, Moth, we'd all have been tarred with the same brush."

"But Jesus, five children came to us for help and we did nothing."

"No, Moth," Screed said, "we did what we had to do."

"We sent them home," Caution Giltrap said, his voice plaintive and eerie. I figured he was tired of listening to the two of them going over the same old ground, desperately searching for some excuse, some absolution where none was to be found. He stood up, drained his glass and walked to the door.

"Where you going, Caution?" Gilheaney asked. Screed looked up at Giltrap and met his eyes but said nothing.

"I'll be getting along home now," Giltrap said and went out the door. And when he was gone, I stepped out of the shadows and showed them my blade and what their shame had driven me to.

I came drifting by this house humming a tune my mother used to sing. He was waiting in his cane chair on the porch, watching the moon come up over Waklaugh Mountain. He lit his pipe and acknowledged my presence with a nod of his head. I pulled up another chair and sat beside him.

"Moth?" he said. "And Lucan?"

I took the blade from my handbag and held it to the sky, letting moonlight glint off the blood-slicked steel.

"It was my decision, girl," he tried to explain. "When you came to us that night at Screed's, with your sister and brothers in tow, and those awful things you told us, Nettie, it was too much. You didn't give us time to think. Never mind what Louis DaLinia said, we never had time. If your pappy found out you'd come to us, he'd have... well it doesn't matter now. I sent you home, Nettie, 'cos I loved this town and these people and I couldn't bear the thought of what it woulda done to them. I see now how wrong I was, how blind."

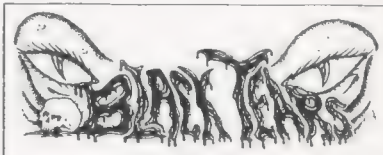
I listened to what he said, believing, but not absolving him. I saw by his face that absolution was no longer what he wanted anyway. He told me how all he'd ever wanted was to raise a family, to watch his children grow, to see his grandchildren come into the world. That was all any of them had ever wanted. I wanted to ask him what about me, how come I was never given that chance? Rage burned inside me as I saw the five of them, Giltrap, Screed, Gilheaney, Cadré and Louis DaLinia coming in the dead of night with their cans of gasoline. I saw them soak the walls and furniture, soak my dead drunk father on the sofa, and then torch my home while my sister and brothers slept. They stood outside waiting to see if anyone got out, listening to the screams of fright and pain and burning.

But I wasn't in there. I was in the barn, numb with pain and terror. Father had caught us coming home. He'd raped me, then beat me senseless. I lay there paralysed, and watched the way you tried to cleanse Burrovage of a sin that was not mine.

Caution was silent. I stood up and sighed as he looked up at me, then turned his face to the mountain. I started humming mother's tune and my blade sang in time as it slid with grace through the night.

And that is why, even as Caution Giltrap's blood dried in the dust, as he atones for the girl he once sent home, this is all, all in the mind. In a little while, when you hear my song drifting by your window as I move out of town, a little while after that, Burrovage will once again be a good place to live and it will all be as if it never happened at all.

***Mike O'Driscoll** is married with one daughter, and has lived in Swansea since 1987. His stories have appeared in BBR (twice, with another forthcoming), Fear, Far Point and various Small Press magazines. He has also been published in the anthologies Darklands 2, The Sun Rises Red, Cold Cuts, and most recently Cold Cuts II. He likes Jonathan Carroll, Lucius Shepard, Don DeLillo, Spaghetti Westerns and ice-cold Guinness.*



6

FICTION BY STUART J. HUGHES, PAUL PINN, TIM LEBBON, JAMES MAC, RHYS H. HUGHES, PAUL DORAN, AND MANY MORE

*"ONE OF THE MORE ATTRACTIVE FICTION ANTHOLOGIES." **THE DARK SIDE***
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from ***Peter Tennant***

The title *Jack Limer's Monsters* conjured up visions of Victorian London and fog shrouded alleys (Jack the Ripper and Lime St). Instead Lawrence Dyer gives us the South Seas and tropical islands, in a story that's marvelously evocative and atmospheric. You can feel the sun beating down on your skin and hear the waves crashing on shore. There's a filmic quality to the prose. For all that though the story is relatively simple. Jack with his wacky ideas stands in the grand tradition of Anglo-Saxon eccentrics. Only the ending is disappointing, a too obvious denouement though it's difficult to envisage another.

Jessica Anderson is a writer who continues to surprise me. *The Surface of Truth* is a skillfully drawn picture of a disturbed personality that evokes our sympathy at the same time as it chills. The effect is rather like riding on a helter skelter, tumbling down out of control. The beauty of the prose only emphasises the savagery of what is happening.

I have mixed feelings about *In* by Brian Howell. The picture of a regimented society, people cut off from nature and reduced to couch potatoes is unsettling. Yet I couldn't quite believe in it, at least not in the scenario portrayed here. Perhaps I'm too optimistic about human beings. Yet I'll remember that final powerful image of planes diving into a blazing target for a long time to come. As a work of fiction *The End of the Road* is completely off the wall, the prose almost distancing the reader from what is taking place. More than anything else it reads like a piece out of Nietzsche. The twist at the end is delightful and perfectly apt in context. You always love the one who hurts you. Human nature through a glass darkly.

Bruce Boston is a good writer, with a lyrical quality to his prose that came over well in the sections that made up *Anesthesia Man.* There was a strong sense of place here in the early hobo section, giving way to a shifting reality and confusion. Yet the parts, much as I enjoyed them, didn't add up to any definite whole and at the end I was left feeling vaguely dissatisfied.

Bittersweet best describes *Cut Flowers* by Kimberley Padgett-Clarke. There's a deep sense of loss at the heart of this simple story. The narrator is mourning not only the loss of someone she loved but also the futility of trying to hold on to the past. I found it very moving. This could easily have been a horror story, but Kim avoids that obvious temptation and the result is far more gratifying.

Not sure what to make of *Thrid & Shift* by Paul Pinn. It takes science fictional trappings and gives them a 180° spin. The picture of a decaying society with rigid social strata was put over with conviction and I found Paul's prose compelling, but the sudden introduction of 'thridding' at the end struck a discordant note. Possibly the story was a bit too ambiguous for its own good.

I loved *The Thin Man's Guide to Slipstream.* Allen Ashley's barbs of satire hit the target with unerring accuracy. The moratorium on TTA's flirtation with slipstream? I prefer crossgenre, or even cross dressing.

Other: Please Explain by Don Webb was interesting but too slight for any great impression. The weakest piece in TTA4 but worth seeing.

I liked *Break Down the Walls of the World* by Steve Antczak a lot. It mixes the old idea of seeing ourselves as others see us with the idea of a sexually transmitted identity to remarkable effect. Strong characterisation and dialogue help the action along. An excellent story.

About the poetry, as you say, no Scrabble constructions. Thank you. My favourite was *The Waiter,* but I enjoyed the other pieces as well.

About the artwork, Ben Mitchell's pieces were very striking and deserved to be featured. Speaking generally though, A5 isn't really ideal for art and I'm not bothered if you miss it out in future. Only use work that fits in with TTA's mood. Don't go farming out stories for illustration. It's not necessary or even desirable. Most of the things in TTA are better left to the readers' imaginations.

Well, I reckon TTA4 was the best yet. And you say TTA5 is going to be a cracker...

from ***John Gower***

TTA is one of the few fiction magazines I've come across that isn't boring.

from ***Desmond Knight***

There were some great stories in TTA4, my favourite being *Jack Limer's Monsters* as I've always had a soft spot for sea monsters. I also thought that *In, The End of the Road* and *Cut Flowers* were all excellent. I thought that Ben Mitchell's artwork was very good; he has an interesting, subtle style which fits in well with the stories.

from ***Alan Frackleton***

TTA4 was excellent. Another great selection of stories, from the wonderful and original *Jack Limer's Monsters* to the dark and moody *Cut Flowers* and *The Surface of Truth.* All were superb. I think Paul Pinn's *Thrid & Shift* is one of the best things he's written, and Brian Howell's *In* just keeps getting better. And, of course, Steve Antczak's *Break Down the Walls of the World* is brilliant. Ben Mitchell's artwork is also very good. I have to say that, if done well, I like to see artwork alongside fiction, but if you were to stick to just print TTA would easily survive without it.

Your suggestion of a 'best of' anthology is a good one. I for one would very much like to see one.

from ***Carol Ann Green***

Thanks for TTA4, which I thoroughly enjoyed! Another good issue, with some brilliant stories, my favourite being *Break Down the Walls of the World* by Steve Antczak. I thought there was some very powerful writing in that story.

from ***Colin Pink***

TTA4 was loaded with interesting stuff. I found *The Thin Man's Guide to Slipstream* very amusing and the

Letters

letters quite interesting even without the context of TTA3. I particularly enjoyed the stories by Steve Antczak, Don Webb, Kimberley Padgett-Clarke, Jessica Anderson and Brian Howell. All had interesting slants. The only story I didn't enjoy at all was Paul Pinn's which was boring; too long, repetitive without going anywhere.

Despite their diversity there does seem to be a family resemblance between many of the stories that gives the magazine a fascinating coherence larger than each single piece.

from ***Jim Steel***

TTA continues to delight—congratulaions for maintaining such a high standard. I particularly liked the stories by Lawrence Dyer and Bruce Boston. Allen Ashley's guide to slipstream was a riot—luckily I didn't have to wince too often (think I should start calling myself James instead of Jim?), maybe about every third line.

from ***Jamie Barras***

I like what I see! I found TTA4's contents to be refreshing, provoking and gosh-darned readable! The uniformly high standard of writing and the depth of invention kept me reading even those stories whose contents didn't thrill me (Steve Antczak's ugly *Break Down the Walls of the World,* Brian Howell's inconsequential *In*) while others I out and out loved. Full stop. (Jessica Anderson's tragedy of hidden gender *The Surface of Truth,* Kimberley Padgett-Clarke's melancholic eulogy *Cut Flowers.*)

On the whole 'form over content' debate: personally, I like a story to have a *story.* I think fiction that lacks an identifiable (though not necessarily explicit or linearly expressed) plot isn't fiction at all, it's prose. A different creative discipline altogether.

from ***Roger Keen***

After seeing TTA, it's clear that much of this slipstream hype has done you a disservice, conjuring a somewhat distorted image of a magazine populated by James Joyce impersonators on acid (or is it Samuel Beckett impersonators on crack?).

How can one describe the fiction in TTA..? *Good* is the word which most readily springs to mind. The quality of the craftsmanship and storytelling is high, and any 'experimental' elements which appear are aesthetically legitimate and unobtrusive. I don't know what all the fuss is about! It seems to me that slipstream in general and TTA in particular has suffered an outbreak of plain old fashioned philistinism—the same kind of knee-jerk reaction against the new which first afflicted Impressionism, Modernism, Dada and so forth. Sure, a lot of new, experimental work is bad; but then so is a lot of traditionally structured work. The point is, any kind of work should be judged on how it succeeds on its *own* terms, not on other outside terms imposed by the critic/complainant. The fiction in TTA *does* succeed: it is involving, entertaining, readable, comprehensible. What's more, by relaxing the requirement for fiction to be clearly categorised as SF, horror, literary or whatever, writers must feel freer to write what they *want* to, rather than modify their work to fit a house style or market niche. This in itself is a breakthrough, and if this is what slipstream is about then all power to it!

from ***Neil Williamson***

TTA4 was definitely the best issue yet. The production values if anything have increased, and Ben Mitchell's artwork is the best I've seen in any magazine for years. The poetry, as always, was succinct and telling, especially Steve Urwin's *Tightrope Walker,* and Allen Ashley's *The Thin Man's Guide to Slipstream* was a cracking way to make a point. A nice healthy piece of sarcasm.

The prose, however, was the main focus of my attention, and overall there was quality right across the board. In a selection that was broader than previously in terms of setting and style, more finely balanced in mood and pace. Stand-outs were: Lawrence Dyer's *Jack Limer's Monsters,* Bruce Boston's *Anesthesia Man* and Steve Antczak's *Break Down the Walls of the World.* Paul Pinn's *Thrid & Shift* was thick with texture and feel, disguising the fact that the story didn't go anywhere. Maybe that's the point, but it's unsatisfying. Don Webb's story was delightfully quixotic and Kimberley Padgett-Clarke's confidently told.

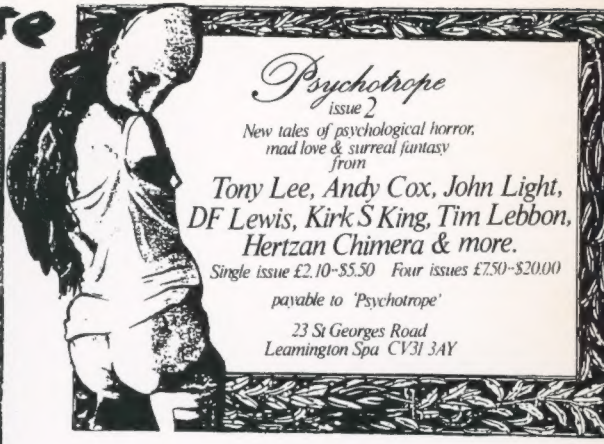
All in all, TTA's first year seems to me to have been a resounding success...I think a 'best of' collection is an excellent idea.

from ***Mark Gale***

The cover was especially haunting—my wife gave me a lecture cos she said it made her skin crawl. Never mind, I'm still trying to bring her around to my way of thinking. Anyway, I must say I have thoroughly enjoyed it, four stories especially. *The Surface of Truth* made me feel for the character; the writing was pacey, straight to the point. *In* was straightforward and reminded me a little of George Orwell's *1984.* It just goes to show what sort of life we idle mortals would lead if technology did everything for us literally. I actually felt sorry for the characters because all they wanted was a normal life, but of course the Guys in Control have other ideas. *Thrid & Shift* had some great descriptions although my Writers' Course tutor would have said they were a little too lengthy. I liked it because it didn't describe the Shift and you weren't even sure exactly what it was. In some ways it was similar to *In* where the individual belief is made the collective and it is wrong to think for oneself. *Break Down the Walls of the World* was definitely the best. It moved well, with sentences short and to the point. A brilliant mixture of dark humour, sex and a little violence. Fantastic! I've read this one three times and enjoyed it as much every time.

Thanks for your letters, including those that aren't reproduced here (less space this issue) and those yet to arrive (I'm compiling this earlier than usual).

Ah Pook Is Here



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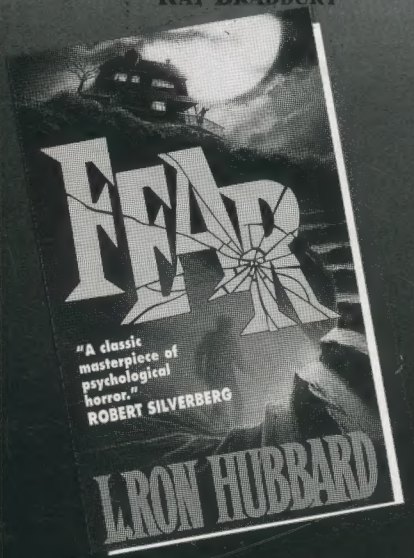

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